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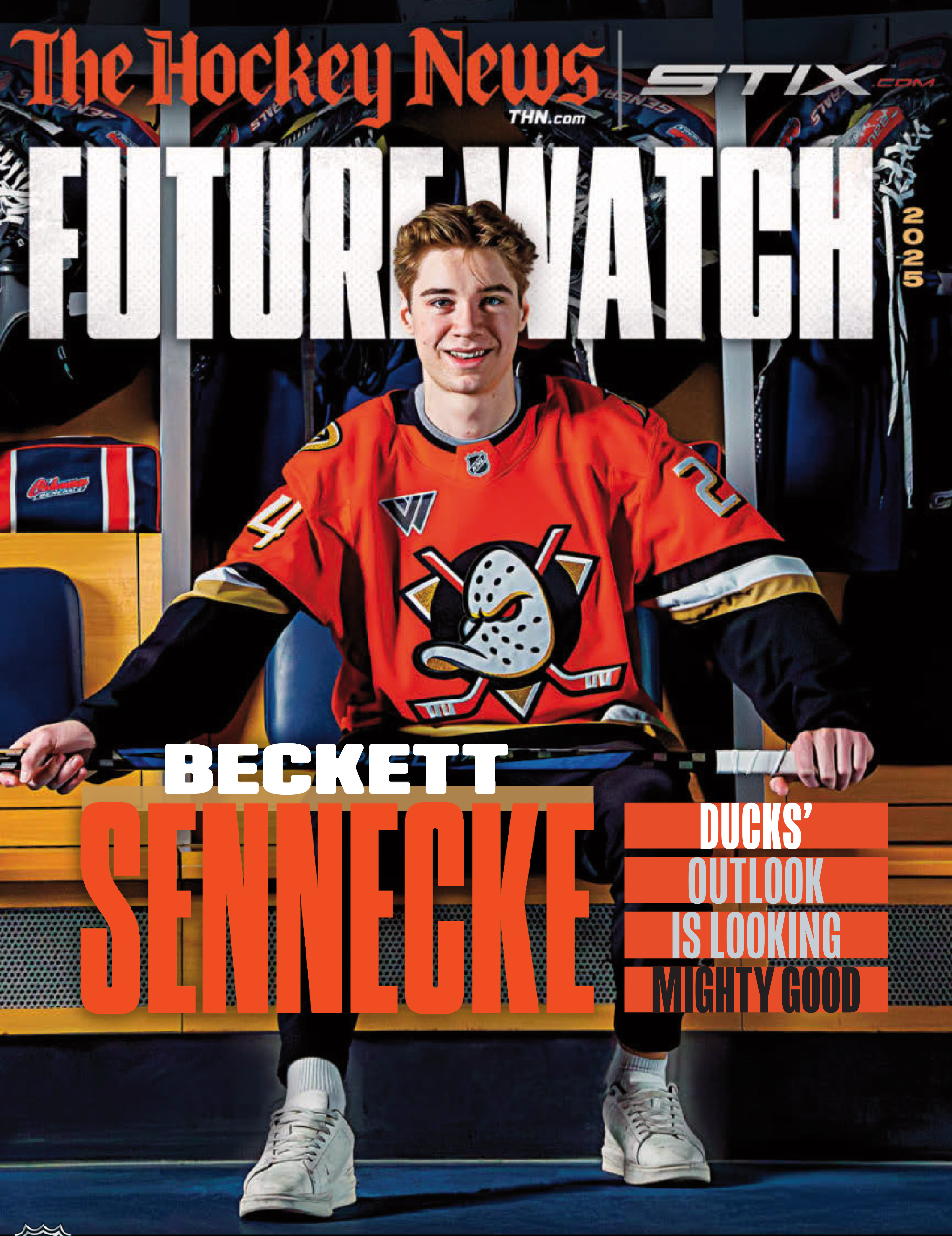

BECKETT SENNECKE

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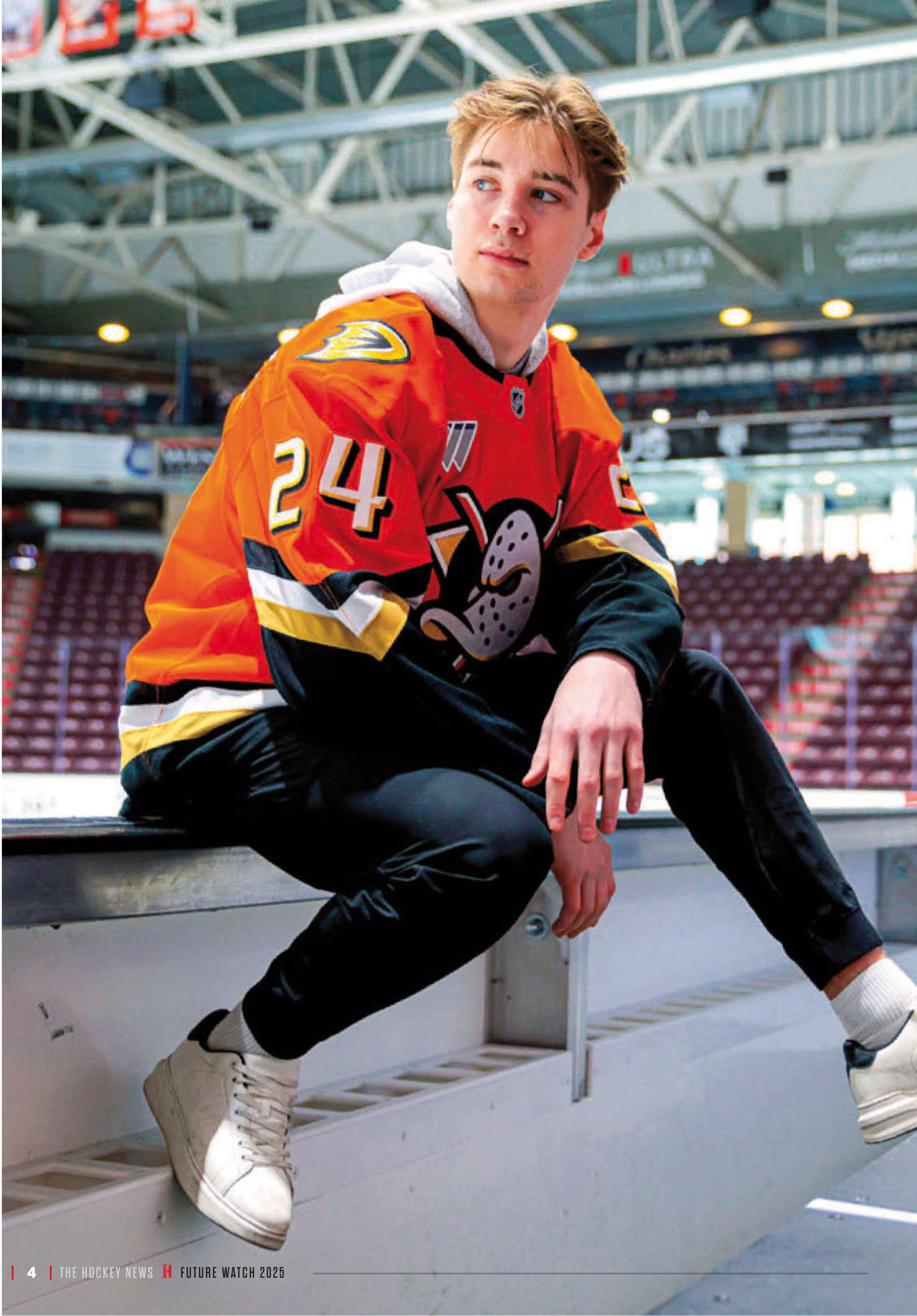


IAN GOODALL/OSHAWA GENERALS

The Hockey News

CONTENTS

FUTURE WATCH 2025 | VOL. 78 NO. 08

COVER STORY

BECKETT SENNECKE | 34

What the…Duck? The surprise No. 3 overall pick from last summer became the darling of the NHL draft with his reaction to Anaheim calling his name. Shocking, in a much less positive way, was being left off Team Canada's WJC entry, but his skills and frame continue to make him a blue-chip talent. **BY KEN CAMPBELL**

FEATURES

24
CAROLINA HURRICANES
The Canes are proving you can be a Cup favorite and produce top young talent at the same time. **BY JARED CLINTON**

30
IVAN DEMIDOV
As they aim to get back into contention, the Canadiens are hoping they have Guy Lafleur 2.0 on the way. **BY KEN CAMPBELL**

40
ZAYNE PAREKH
The brash blueliner looks like a future star who'll bring Flames fans to their feet for years to come. **BY TONY FERRARI**

44
TREY AUGUSTINE
The Wings' goalie prospect showed his mental mettle while playing a key role in reviving Michigan St. **BY JARED CLINTON**

48
BERKLY CATTON
A bit of fresh air gave the Kraken's top prospect the reset he needed to again dominate the 'Dub.' **BY KEN CAMPBELL**

52
TENNESSEE STATE
Only the tough need apply as the Tigers prepare to launch the first HBCU hockey program. **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

94
PWHL EXPANSION
With the league's early success and the talent available, adding more teams is already on the table. **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

96
WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT
The NCAA, PWHL and SDHL have a nice development loop, but more stops would be welcome. **BY IAN KENNEDY**

DEPARTMENTS

10
BUZZ
The NCAA's new eligibility rules have junior and college teams smiling.

56
NHL TEAM REPORTS
The top 10 youngsters for each NHL club and the top 100 prospects worldwide.

100
SNEAK PEEKS
Keep an eye on these elite talents for the 2025, 2026 and 2027 NHL drafts.

106
REWIND
A look back at the hits and misses from the 2020 and 2015 Future Watch lists.

110
MONEY & POWER
Few know the impact of the NCAA rule change better than Steve Metcalf.

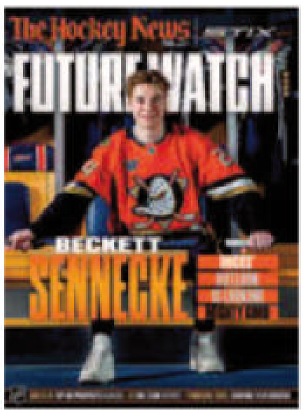
COLUMNS

7
THE FIRST WORD
Why the Washington Capitals are the poster child for rebuilding on the fly.

9
PUBLISHER'S NOTE
THN.com/archive has everything you need to read the magazine digitally.

114
THE LAST WORD
'Nine seconds' at the 4 Nations may change hockey's fate for generations.

ON THE COVER



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CAPITALS' COMMAND CONTINUES

FUTURE WATCH IS THE issue dedicated to the critical player development all 32 NHL teams invest in – and the inevitable rebuilding cycles they endure. It's the one place you expect to see retooling teams at the top of the upside-down standings when we rank teams based on their prospect strength.

Teams such as San Jose, Chicago and Columbus are now at various stages of restocking the cupboards, filling the pipelines – whatever cliché you fancy. Some of them seem like perennial rebuilders. Just ask the fans in Detroit, Anaheim, Ottawa, Montreal and Buffalo. They know what it's like near the bottom of the standings and are eager to see their teams closer to the top.

But some teams aren't part of that cycle.

In case you blinked and missed it, how about that rebuilding job by the Washington Capitals? They sure weren't on the bottom for long. In actuality, it wasn't even a rebuild. But for them, it was. Let's look at the most compelling team of the past generation.

From 2007-08 to 2021-22, a span of 15 seasons during which Alex Ovechkin was the common denominator, the Capitals had the best overall record in the NHL. Across more than 1,000 regular-season games, Washington had a .641 points percentage, slightly better than Pittsburgh (.638) and Boston (.634). The Caps won one Stanley Cup during that 15-year stretch (in 2018) but finished first three times and were among the top seven teams an amazing nine times. Only once in those 15 seasons were the Capitals in the bottom half of the league standings – and that was a respectable 17th in 2013-14.

Then Washington hit the skids in 2022-23 – if you call 25th overall bottoming out. Hockey analysts saw it coming. Ovechkin was getting older. Nicklas Backstrom was in his mid-30s with an ailing hip. Evgeny Kuznetsov and T.J. Oshie were tailing off as top-shelf players. Braden Holtby had moved on, and there was a revolving door in the crease. The expectation was Washington would surely spend some time at the bottom of the standings, load up on draft picks and prospects, likely bid adieu to Ovechkin, and, right about this time or maybe next year, we'd be featuring them on the cover of Future Watch as the new-look Capitals.

So much for scripted narratives.

Under rookie coach Spencer Carbery last season, the Capitals shocked the critics and qualified for the playoffs. Astute under-the-radar player acquisitions by then-GM Brian MacLellan in preceding years (think Charlie Lindgren, Dylan Strome, Rasmus Sandin, Trevor van Riemsdyk), impressive internal development (Connor McMichael, Aliaksei Protas, Martin Fehervary) and a grey-but-ageless Ovechkin turned Washington's projected rebuild into a rebirth.

And look at what's happening this season. The Caps were virtual Presidents' Trophy holders through early February. Sure, they have the NHL's seventh-oldest roster right now, but they've also maintained excellent player-system development while eschewing a traditional – and very inexact – rebuild. The Capitals have several high-end prospects following in the footsteps of McMichael and Protas, and they rank in the top third in terms of quality of prospects and 21-and-under NHLers. In Future Watch this year, they rank ninth. Last year, they were 19th. And all this despite having just once drafted in the top 10 in the past 17 drafts (Ryan Leonard, eighth overall in 2023, the season they bottomed out). "We've surprised some people, haven't we," said Caps assistant GM Ross Mahoney. "I'm not going to say I knew this was coming, but I do have a lot of faith in our draft selections and the prospects in our system."

Ivan Miroshnichenko was drafted 20th overall in 2022, and Hendrix Lapierre was taken 22nd overall in 2020. They're both gradually getting their feet wet in the NHL. The Capitals have always been patient and cautious with the development of their prospects. Rarely do you see Washington fast-track a player along at 19 or 20. McMichael and Protas are perfect examples, both having breakout campaigns at 24, five-plus years after being drafted.

Eventually, Ovechkin and veterans such as John Carlson will reach the end of the road. But they'll have done so with an outstanding career winning percentage thanks to Washington's build-while-you-contend strategy.

As the NHL roster does turn over, prospects such as Miroshnichenko, Lapierre, Leonard, Cole Hutson, Andrew Cristall and Terik Parascak will step in and keep the Caps rolling. H

Brian Costello
Editor
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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Out With The Old Digital App, In With The New Digital Magazine Archive

PHOTO BY WASHINGTON TALENT AGENCY

A COUPLE OF DECADES AGO, long before The Hockey News digital Archive, which contains every issue dating back to 1947, was unveiled to the world in 2024, THN launched what is now an outdated app, which is now being retired.

The Archive is a searchable database of every print issue and story that The Hockey News has published during the past 78 years. The app is basically a non-searchable PDF version of the print magazine that, up until Feb. 15, 2025, was available in the Google Play store and in the Apple app store.

When trying to compare the two platforms, think of the digital Archive as a 2025 Corvette and the digital app as a 2005 Corvette: both are great cars, but the newer one has more features, is much more powerful, much faster, and you get more out of it.

Ninety-eight percent of our readers subscribe to the print-and-digital-app offering of the magazine, while only two percent subscribe to the digital-app-only version. Only four percent of all subscribers primarily use the digital app, because it is vintage technology, and people want to be able to search for content that is of interest to them. Searchability is what people demand.

Effective Feb. 15, 2025, the digital app will no longer be available for download from the Google Play store or the Apple app store. If you have the app on your phone, it will no longer be updated or supported, so we invite you to go to the digital Archive, where there is so much more content for you to read, and it is all searchable.

Digital app users with the app already installed on their phones prior to Feb. 15, 2025, will continue to receive the old PDF files through the end of 2025. Starting Jan. 1, 2026, these PDF files will no longer be sent to those with the digital app on their phones. If you download these PDF files into your digital-app library on your phone, they will remain there for as long as you have the digital app on your phone. However, if you do not download them to your library by the end of 2025, you will never be able to do so later. Also, eventually, the digital app will not work, and you will lose whatever you have saved in your library, and we cannot recover it for you.

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I promised subscribers when I acquired The Hockey News in 2018 that I would continually invest in the quality and amount of the content as well as the delivery methods. I believe that the upgrade from the old digital app to the new digital Archive accomplishes all that and more.

W. Graeme Roustan

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BUZZ

14 BEHIND THE MASK / JERSEY HOUND 15 EAGLE EYE-O-METER 16 NHL PROSPECTS AT WJC
17 HISTORIC OHA GAME 18 COUNTDOWN 20 PUCK CULTURE 23 LIFE'S BETTER WITH 'BROPH'

MAX LEWIS/GTHL

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Major junior or U.S. college? Before, it was a 'pick one' proposition. Now, prospects can take advantage of both routes. And teams on either side are thrilled **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

ON A FRIGID WINTER night in north Toronto, scouts and GMs from across the OHL packed into Scotiabank Pond to watch the Greater Toronto League's U-16 Top Prospects Game, featuring some of the best and brightest available for the 2025 OHL draft. But they weren't the only ones in the stands among the families and friends.

Also scouting that night was Boston College assistant coach Brent Darnell, who, all of a sudden, has much more of a reason to trek across the border. That's because the top players in the GTHL and their peers across Canada no longer have to decide between the NCAA path and major junior. Thanks to the NCAA's eligibility changes this autumn, players can now suit up in the CHL before they go to college. While we are still in the early days of this new world, the initial feelings from both sides are overwhelmingly positive.

For NCAA programs, the new edict means a much wider net to cast for recruiting. "For sure," Darnell said. "Especially in Toronto, which is the hockey hotbed of the world, essentially. We want to be in the mix for top players. I remember last year going to that game, the buzz was that a lot of the '08s were talking about going to college. Then, as the months went on, you found out they were going to the OHL, so you wrote them off. Now, there's a wider net for higher-end players."

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BIRD DOGS OF ALL FEATHERS
On top of the OHL scouts, there were reps from NCAA programs on hand to watch the GTHL Top Prospects Game.

DARNELL: MEG KELLY/BOSTON COLLEGE ATHLETICS
PRIDHAM: TIFFANY LUKE/KITCHENER RANGERS

Some of last year's top U-16 players from the GTHL did indeed choose the college route, such as Caleb Malhotra and Zach Nyman. But at the time, that meant eschewing the OHL in favor of the BCHL, a Jr. A circuit that has traditionally been one of the best places for kids to go before college while maintaining their NCAA eligibility. This year's group, led by Charlie Murata (see pg. 104), can consider a future college commitment while playing in the OHL. And NCAA teams aren't just looking at the very top. "Events like this (the GTHL prospects game), you can build a book on a kid," Darnell said. "Maybe he was the 20th-best player in that game, and you like him. You might not go after him right away, but now you can track him in junior hockey."

BRENT DARNELL

Thanks to the eligibility changes, there have already been several NHL draft picks who have left Jr. A leagues or the USHL in favor of the CHL. For example, Boston University commit Jack Pridham is a Chicago Blackhawks pick who left the BCHL's West Kelowna Warriors after 12 games and joined the OHL's Kitchener Rangers, for whom he has been a point-per-game player.

Darnell sees a lot of different advantages to the new landscape, including the chance for players to develop at their own pace. He noted that many American kids want to play as true freshmen, but the reality is that such a jump is tough. Boston College has players who could do it – such as James Hagens, Ryan Leonard and Gabe Perreault – but they're the highest of high-end talents, not the norm. Now, your average college player doesn't have to force things. Playing for a top OHL program such as London, Kitchener or Windsor could set them up for future NCAA success. "If you play another year in that league, you might be a captain." Darnell said. "And that's beneficial, too, outside of playing 60 more games at that level and developing."

JACK PRIDHAM

We're seeing players take advantage of the change already. Simon Wang, a potential top-40 pick for the 2025 draft, is a BU commit who had been playing in the Ontario Jr. A League with the King Rebellion, but since the new ruling, he's been able to cut his teeth in the OHL with the Oshawa Generals. Jacob Xu and Noah Kosick are 2026 NHL draft prospects with NCAA commitments who have seen time with OHL Kitchener and WHL Calgary, respectively.

The infusion of talent from other junior leagues has also been a boon for CHL franchises. The OHL's Brampton Steelheads were decimated by injuries early on while also contending with the fact that five of their players went to the World Junior Championship – including starting goalie Jack Ivankovic and their top two scorers, Porter Martone and Carson Rehkopf. One of the players they were able to bring in to fill the void was 2025 NHL draft prospect Aidan Lane, a Harvard commit and star of the St. Andrew's College prep team just north of Toronto.

Lane would not have been available in the past, nor would OJHL players such as Wang or Xu. So CHL teams are benefiting from the new arrangement, too. "It's a great opportunity for us to let a younger player develop in the OJHL for a year or two and then step in when he's ready, as opposed to when he's 16," said Brampton coach-GM James Richmond. "If he comes in now, he can get his feet wet with us, then get more games in the OJHL at the right pace."

For Richmond, there's a mutually beneficial system shaping up, where CHL teams can get talented players en route to the NCAA while college programs get more experienced fresh-

OPTIONS MARKET

Prospects such as Murata, right, can now choose to suit up for a CHL team without burning their NCAA eligibility.

men who are battle-tested in major junior before they arrive on campus. "I played at UNH," he said. "If New Hampshire or Wisconsin gets a player after four or five years in the CHL, man oh man, they're getting a high-end player."

One program that has been especially active in recruiting CHLers is Bowling Green State, whose coach just happened to spend the past seven seasons as the bench boss of WHL Everett. Now with the NCAA's Falcons, Dennis Williams (who also coached Connor Bedard and Canada to gold at the 2023 WJC) has been collecting commits from major-junior players at a dizzying pace, with nine and counting. The crew includes WHL Vancouver's Mazden Leslie, one of the top-scoring defensemen in the 'Dub,' plus QMJHL Halifax starting goalie Jacob Steinman and two of WHL Tri-City's top scorers, Jake Sloan and Brandon Whynott.

The timing could not have been better for the Falcons. Williams was coming in as a first-year coach, and the team didn't have a lot of future commitments. Then, a month into the season, he suddenly had access to the WHL's talent pool. "For us at Bowling Green," Williams said, "it afforded us an opportunity to tap into a league that I had more familiarity with, having coached against those players but also having relationships with all those GMs."

Richmond believes this new era will be nothing but a positive for players as well as both CHL and NCAA teams.

Bowling Green plays in the CCHA, a conference that skews older. So recruiting CHLers who have already played years of major junior made the most sense for Williams' team. But he wants CHL players to know that college won't be a cakewalk. "Making a jump from junior to college is still a large jump, no matter what league you come out of," Williams said. "It's like when I was in Everett, when your first-round draft pick comes in, there's an adjustment period. It's going to be the same here. The average age in college hockey is probably 22. Those are *men*. The players are older, bigger and stronger than they're used to. Your fourth-line player could be a 25-year-old."

There's also the NCAA transfer portal to reckon with. Player movement has been another revolution in college sports recently, and the new eligibility rule helps schools that lose what they used to assume was going to be a four-year player after perhaps only one season.

So far, everyone is in the honeymoon stage. When the change initially happened, there were rumors that top 2025 NHL draft prospects from the OHL were already looking at NCAA schools for next year, but that has yet to materialize. Right now, there's just a lot of co-operation – and a lot more NCAA coaches coming to major-junior games. "One-hundred percent," Richmond said. "Obviously, before, they didn't come at all, so they come a lot more now. We're in constant contact, sharing academic transcripts to help our kids get into the schools they want to get into."

For now, it's a win-win. Major junior is getting more talent, the NCAA is getting more talent, and the players are getting more opportunities. "At the end of the day, we're all about development," Williams said. "We want every player to leave here with a degree and a great experience after four years. I think all schools can attest to that."

If a player has designs on going pro one day, this new world gives them a much longer timeframe. "Instead of a four-year runway, the players now have eight or nine years," Richmond said. "The CHL still continues to be the No. 1 producer of NHL talent, so come to the CHL and choose how many years you want to stay. Do you make it in three, four, five? Or do you need a couple more years of NCAA hockey? On the other side, if you want to play NCAA hockey, those coaches are going to be recruiting from the best junior leagues in the world, and the CHL is at the top. I think it's great for the players, our leagues and the NCAA." H

MURATA: MAX LEWIS/GTHL; RICHMOND: PHOTO BY BRAMPTON STEELHEADS

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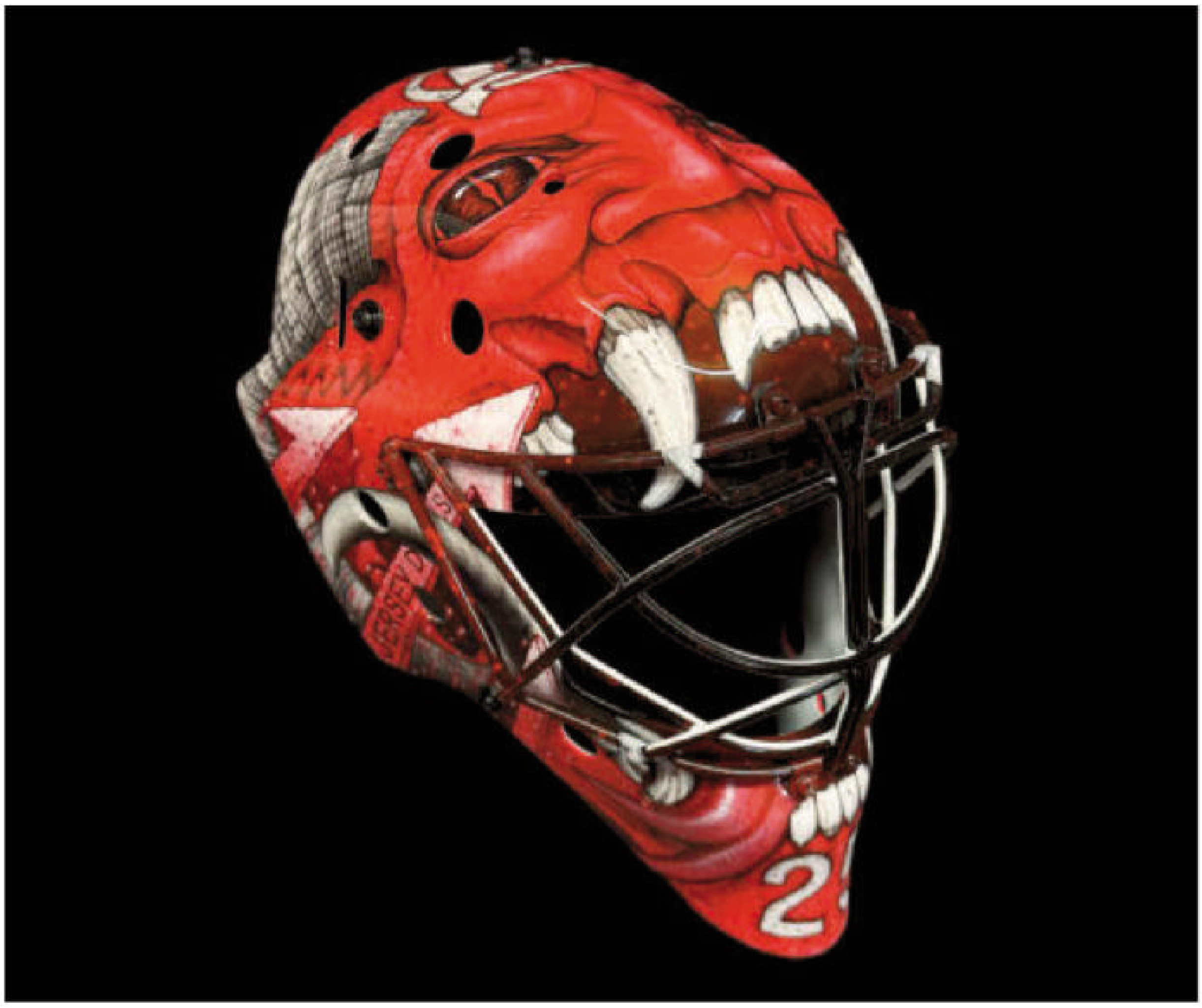
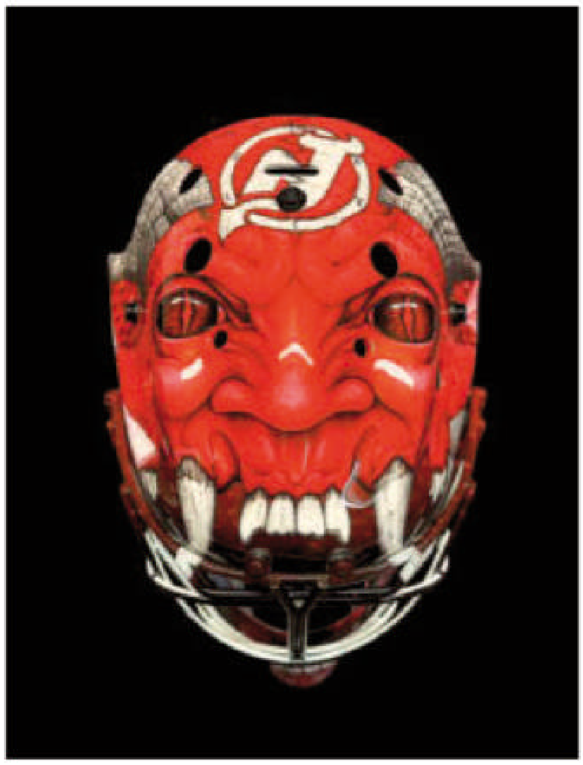
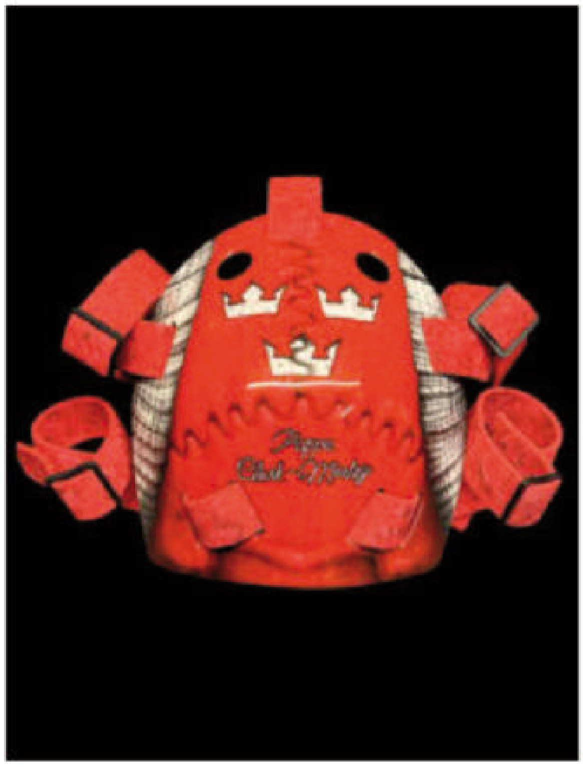
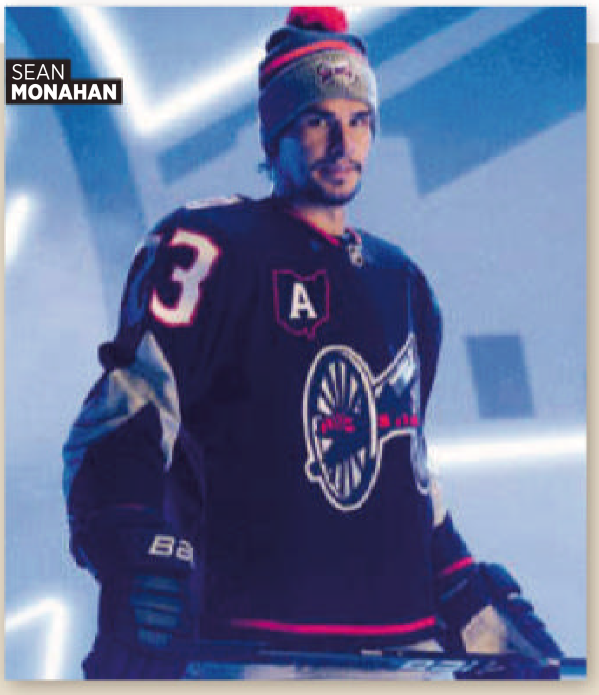


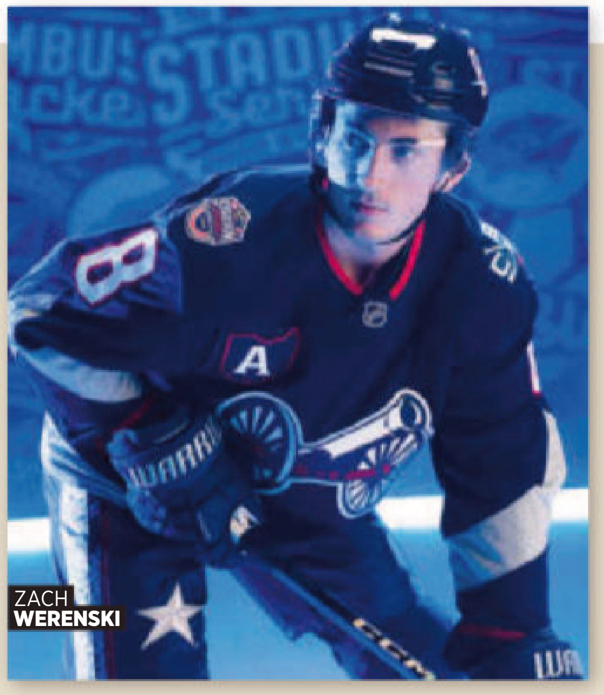




JACOB MARKSTROM | NEW JERSEY DEVILS

ACQUIRING JACOB MARKSTROM HAS been a godsend for New Jersey's on-ice fortunes. But given the netminder's proclivity for adorning some of the most demonic-looking headwear in the game, his arrival has lent itself to some devilishly great designs. Already having paid homage to the mythological Jersey Devil with one of his first masks, Markstrom's latest lid – designed and painted by longtime collaborator Jordon Bourgeault of JBo Airbrush – combines the obvious monster motif with tried-and-true portrait design to outstanding effect. The devil's gaping maw, complete with forked tongue, stretches around Markstrom's cage, while embers spit off the white-hot pitchfork and tail on the side panels. The Devils logo, painted to appear as if carved into bone, rests on the mask's crown, too. Of course, seeing it requires one to peel their eyes away from the deep red snake eyes peering into your soul. **– JARED CLINTON**





Jersey HOUND

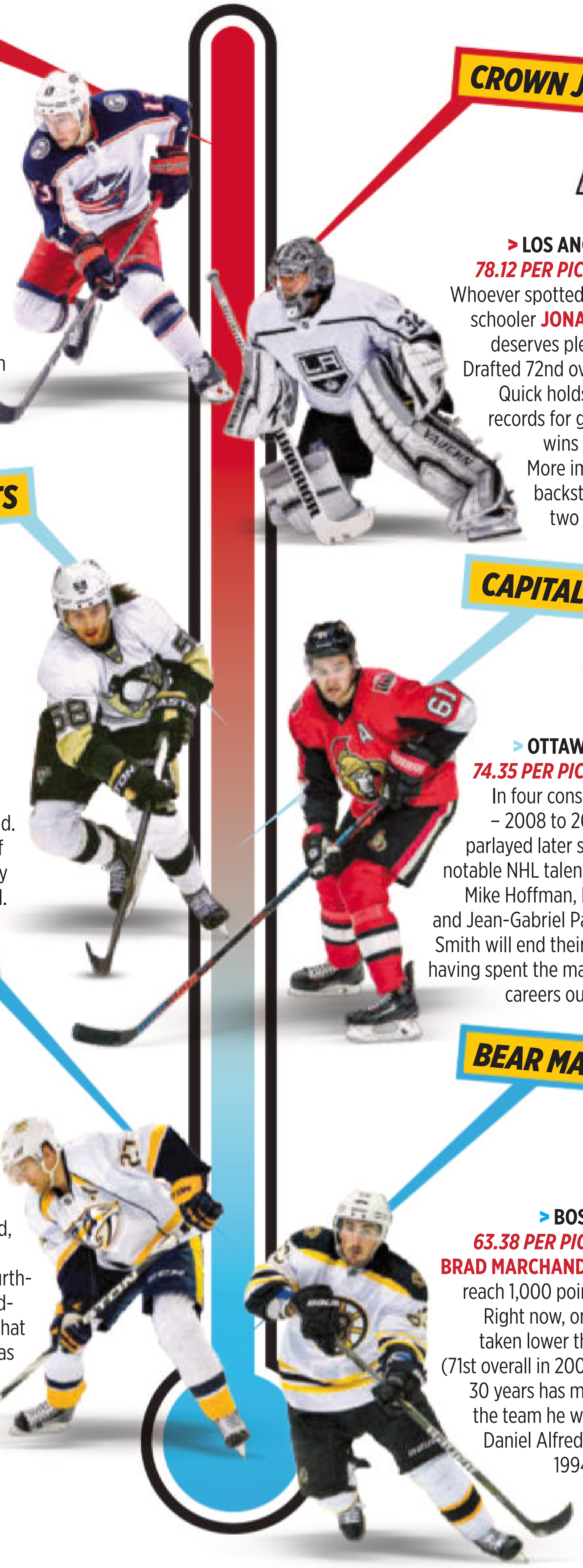
COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS | 2024-25

WHEN IT COMES TO NHL arena gimmicks, none are as powerful as the cannon wielded by the Blue Jackets. It strikes fear into the hearts of visiting media members while delighting fans. So, with Columbus playing in its first outdoor game – at Ohio Stadium on March 1 – the cannon had to be front and center. The Blue Jackets' kit for the Stadium Series game against Detroit is strong, with the cannon crest dominating. The color scheme is solid, and the big numbers are functional (so fans can see them from further away when outdoors) and aesthetically pleasing. Using a geographic outline of Ohio around the 'C' and 'A' is also a nice touch. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

MASK: JORDON BOURGEAULT/JBOAIRBRUSH.COM; JERSEY: PHOTOS BY FANATICS

EAGLE EYE-O-METER

The best scouting staffs are able to convert mid- and late-round picks into NHL talent. These teams have made the most of picks from the third round or later since 2004, ranked by average games played per selection **BY JARED CLINTON**



CANNON AID

> COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS
90.30 PER PICK (9,572 GP)
The Jackets' scouting staff deserves an A-plus, using third-round-or-later picks to net Kris Russell, David Savard and **CAM ATKINSON**. The trio has more than 2,500 games in the NHL. Any lack of team success can't be blamed on the bird dogs.

CROWN JEWELS

> LOS ANGELES KINGS
78.12 PER PICK (8,437 GP)
Whoever spotted nimble high-schooler **JONATHAN QUICK** deserves plenty of praise. Drafted 72nd overall in 2005, Quick holds Kings goalie records for games played, wins and shutouts. More importantly, he backstopped L.A. to two Stanley Cups.

IT AIN'T THE PITTS

> PITTSBURGH PENGUINS
76.91 PER PICK (7,230 GP)
Top-two picks helped land Crosby, Malkin and Fleury. But **KRIS LETANG** was a third-round selection, and his importance can't be overstated. He anchored the 'D' for two of Pittsburgh's three 21st-century Cups. Injury cost him the third.

CAPITAL GAINS

> OTTAWA SENATORS
74.35 PER PICK (7,584 GP)
In four consecutive drafts – 2008 to 2011 – the Sens parlayed later selections into notable NHL talent: Zack Smith, Mike Hoffman, **MARK STONE** and Jean-Gabriel Pageau. All but Smith will end their playing days having spent the majority of their careers outside Ottawa.

ON THE PROWL

> NASHVILLE PREDATORS
70.10 PER PICK (8,412 GP)
Though the Preds rank third in total GP by NHLers drafted after the second round, their average drops because their 120 late picks are the fourth-most since 2004. Their second-highest-scoring draftee over that span, **PATRIC HORNQVIST**, was picked last overall in 2005.

BEAR MAXIMUM

> BOSTON BRUINS
63.38 PER PICK (5,641 GP)
BRAD MARCHAND is on pace to reach 1,000 points as a Bruin. Right now, only one player taken lower than Marchand (71st overall in 2006) in the past 30 years has more points for the team he was drafted by: Daniel Alfredsson (133rd in 1994) for Ottawa.

ATKINSON, MARCHAND: TOM SZCZERBOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; HORNQVIST: CANDICE WARD-USA TODAY SPORTS; QUICK, LETANG: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; STONE: MARC DESROSIERS-USA TODAY SPORTS

KRISTEN CAMPBELL G

In the CARDS

WITH THE PWHL NOW in its second year, it was only a matter of time before fans would get trading cards based on the new league. Upper Deck released its 2024 PWHL First Edition set in late January. It contains 70 cards: 50 base cards and 20 short-printed "Young Guns" of the league's top stars, such as Marie-Philip Poulin, Hilary Knight and Taylor Heise. The base set is easy enough to put together – one full box should do the trick – but the Young Guns subset, found three per box, will be more challenging to complete. A box of 2024 PWHL First Edition cards contains 12 six-card packs. Randomly inserted are Dazzlers and Portraits inserts, as well as Young Guns outburst parallels in red, silver and gold. **– SAL BARRY**

YoungGUNS
MARIE-PHILIP POULIN F

OTTO STENBERG

BLUE SKIES AHEAD

WJC indicates that St. Louis' pipeline will be a gateway to success **BY LUCA TERSIGNI**

MOST NHL TEAMS VIEW prospects as their holy grails. As we've seen repeatedly, the most proven path to success is for a team to create a core through the draft and nurture young prospects rather than hastily attempt to revamp their roster with a flurry of free-agent signings.

With that in mind, what can we glean from the 2025 World Junior Championship? The tournament featured many of the world's top prospects facing off in a high-stakes atmosphere, and it stands to reason having more youngsters at the event portends a bright future for an NHL club. And perhaps no team should be as pleased as St. Louis.

The Blues not only had a league-high nine prospects at the 2025 WJC, but several of those players flourished. Jakub Stancl (106th overall in 2023) averaged a goal per game and had 10 points in seven games for Czechia, while Dalibor Dvorsky (10th in '23) also notched a goal per game and had nine points in five games for Slovakia. Both young guns finished in the top seven in tournament scoring. Otto Stenberg (25th in '23) tied for third in scoring for Sweden with eight points in seven games, Adam Jecho (95th in '24) was top-five in scoring for Czechia with seven points in as many games and Juraj Pekarcik (76th in '23) had seven points in five games for Slovakia. St. Louis was sitting outside the playoff picture as of early February, but the organization can definitely take in the 2025 world juniors as a win for the future.

The following is a list of 2025 WJC players – sorted by NHL affiliation – with their tournament stats (skaters: GP-G-A-Pts-PIM; goalies: SP, GAA).

IIHF NHL TEAM REPRESENTATION

ANAHEIM DUCKS (4)

Carey Terrance, USA	7-2-0-2-6
Austin Burnevik, USA	7-0-0-0-2
Vojtech Port, Cze	7-0-4-4-2
Darels Uljanskis, Lat	5-0-1-1-4

BOSTON BRUINS (0)

BUFFALO SABRES (6)

Brodie Ziemer, USA	7-3-4-7-0
Adam Kleber, USA	6-0-1-1-4
Anton Wahlberg, Swe	7-4-4-8-2
Konsta Helenius, Fin	7-0-6-6-0
Maxim Strbak, Svk	5-1-5-6-0
Norwin Panocha, Ger	5-0-1-1-0

CALGARY FLAMES (1)

Axel Hurtig, Swe	7-0-1-1-0

CAROLINA HURRICANES (3)

Bradly Nadeau, Can	5-2-0-2-0
Felix Unger Sorum, Swe	7-1-9-10-0
Oskar Vuollet, Swe	7-1-0-1-0

CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS (2)

Oliver Moore, USA	7-1-4-5-0
Jiri Felcman, Cze	7-0-2-2-8

COLORADO AVALANCHE (1)

Calum Ritchie, Can	5-1-1-2-14

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS (2)

Luca Pinelli, Can	5-1-1-2-8
Melvin Strahl, Swe	n/a

DALLAS STARS (2)

Aram Minnetian, USA	6-0-2-2-0
Emil Hemming, Fin	7-1-3-4-4

DETROIT RED WINGS (4)

Max Plante, USA	6-1-2-3-4
Trey Augustine, USA	.917, 2.52
Axel Sandin-Pellikka, Swe	7-4-6-10-6
Jesse Kiiskinen, Fin	7-6-1-7-0

EDMONTON OILERS (2)

Beau Akey, Can	5-0-0-0-0
Paul Fischer, USA	2-0-1-1-0

FLORIDA PANTHERS (1)

Linus Eriksson, Swe	7-2-0-2-2

LOS ANGELES KINGS (3)

Carter George, Can	.936, 1.76
Hampton Slukynsky, USA	.933, 1.50
Jakub Dvorak, Cze	7-1-0-1-0

MINNESOTA WILD (4)

Zeev Buium, USA	7-2-4-6-2
Rasmus Kumpulainen, Fin	6-2-1-3-0
Sebastian Soini, Fin	2-0-0-0-0
Aron Kiviharju, Fin	7-0-3-3-2

MONTREAL CANADIENS (1)

Rasmus Bergqvist, Swe	7-1-2-3-6

NASHVILLE PREDATORS (7)

Andrew Gibson, Can	5-0-0-0-8
Tanner Molendyk, Can	5-0-2-2-4
Teddy Stiga, USA	6-1-2-3-0
Joey Willis, USA	2-0-2-2-2
David Edstrom, Swe	7-4-2-6-0
Felix Nilsson, Swe	7-1-5-6-2
Viggo Gustafsson, Swe	7-0-3-3-10

NEW JERSEY DEVILS (1)

Herman Traff, Swe	7-2-0-2-4

NEW YORK ISLANDERS (4)

Danny Nelson, USA	7-4-2-6-0
Cole Eiserman, USA	7-3-4-7-6
Marcus Gidlof, Swe	.938, 1.38
Jesse Nurmi, Fin	7-2-3-5-2

NEW YORK RANGERS (3)

Gabe Perreault, USA	7-3-7-10-0
Drew Fortescue, USA	7-0-0-0-4
Rico Gredig, Sui	4-0-1-1-6

OTTAWA SENATORS (1)

Vladimir Nikitin, Kaz	.836, 6.07

PHILADELPHIA FLYERS (4)

Jett Luchanko, Can	5-1-0-1-2
Oliver Bonk, Can	5-1-1-2-2
Heikki Ruohonen, Fin	7-0-4-4-0
Carson Bjarnason, Can	n/a

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS (3)

Tanner Howe, Can	5-1-0-1-4
Kalle Kangas, Fin	7-0-1-1-8
Emil Pieniniemi, Fin	6-2-1-3-31

ST. LOUIS BLUES (9)

Colin Ralph, USA	7-0-1-1-0
Otto Stenberg, Swe	7-3-5-8-2
Theo Lindstein, Swe	7-0-4-4-2
Adam Jecho, Cze	7-2-5-7-2
Ondrej Kos, Cze	7-1-0-1-4
Jakub Stancl, Cze	7-7-3-10-0
Adam Jiricek, Cze	7-0-5-5-0
Dalibor Dvorsky, Svk	5-5-4-9-0
Juraj Pekarcik, Svk	5-3-4-7-2

SAN JOSE SHARKS (4)

Sam Dickinson, Can	5-0-2-2-8
Kasper Halttunen, Fin	7-1-3-4-6
Christian Kirsch, Sui	.878, 3.52
Brandon Svoboda, USA	7-3-3-6-2

SEATTLE KRAKEN (8)

Berkly Catton, Can	5-0-1-1-6
Carson Rehkopf, Can	2-0-0-0-4
Caden Price, Can	5-1-1-2-0
Zeb Forsfjall, Swe	7-2-3-5-0
Julius Miettinen, Fin	7-1-1-2-4
Kim Saarinen, Fin	n/a
Eduard Sale, Cze	7-6-2-8-4
Jakub Fibigr, Cze	7-0-5-5-2

TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING (2)

Ethan Gauthier, Can	5-0-0-0-4
Joona Saarelainen, Fin	7-0-1-1-0

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS (2)

Easton Cowan, Can	5-1-2-3-4
Miroslav Holinka, Cze	7-1-3-4-4

UTAH HOCKEY CLUB (6)

Cole Beaudoin, Can	5-0-1-1-27
Melker Thelin, Swe	.885, 2.91
Noel Nordh, Swe	3-0-0-0-0
Veeti Vaisanen, Fin	7-0-1-1-6
Vojtech Hradec, Cze	7-4-4-8-4
Michael Hrabal, Cze	.919, 2.45

VANCOUVER CANUCKS (3)

Sawyer Mynio, Can	3-0-1-1-2
Tom Willander, Swe	7-2-3-5-8
Basile Sansonnens, Sui	5-0-0-0-2

VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS (3)

Mathieu Cataford, Can	5-1-0-1-0
Trevor Connelly, USA	7-1-3-4-0
Tuomas Uronen, Fin	7-2-1-3-0

WASHINGTON CAPITALS (6)

Ryan Leonard, USA	7-5-5-10-12
Cole Hutson, USA	7-3-8-11-2
Petr Sikora, Cze	7-4-3-7-6
Miroslav Satan, Svk	3-0-0-0-0
Leon Muggli, Sui	5-0-3-3-4
Eriks Mateiko, Lat	5-5-0-5-0

WINNIPEG JETS (1)

Brayden Yager, Can	5-0-3-3-0

DAVID REGINEK-USA TODAY SPORTS

HILLARY **BRENNAN**

ONTARIO HOCKEY ASSOCIATION

NEXT UP: THE NHL

Historic crew for OHA contest highlights bright future for female officials at all levels

BY CAROL SCHRAM

ON THE THIRD WEEKEND in January, 345 teams converged on Southern Ontario for Canada's largest minor-hockey tournament, the Oakville Rangers Winter Classic. Friday night at the Sixteen Mile Sports Complex, hundreds of rowdy kids packed the stands to watch the hometown Oakville Blades take down the King Rebellion 4-1 in OJHL Jr. A action.

On the surface, it was a familiar scene. But history was made that night, as an all-female crew handled the officiating for the first time in the Ontario Hockey Association. With Lacey Senuk and Hillary Brennan wearing the referees' armbands while Laura Gutauskas and Marlowe Schott worked the lines, the game itself was pretty standard stuff. The penalty total came out to 26 minutes, including scrums in each period that led to offsetting infractions. "You're never sure how the boys are going to be, if they're going to be on their best behavior or their worst," Gutauskas said. "We were all really pleasantly surprised that it felt like any other game that I would do with any other crew."

Kevin Pollock's 25-year NHL refereeing career ended abruptly due to a serious knee injury last February, just two months before he was scheduled to retire. In August, he signed on as the OHA's new officiating director, where he oversees a roster of about 450 officials working games across three junior and two senior leagues. The group includes 15 women. As Pollock began evaluating game performances, something stood out. "I identified these four ladies, not because they're ladies, but they're good officials," he said.

From there, the plan was hatched to showcase them together in the OJHL, the highest junior league under the OHA umbrella. "Everybody embraced it," Pollock said. "It was to say, 'Hey, look at these great women. They're no different than the men, and they do as good of a job as our best men.' "

Both referees and linespeople need to be good athletes and strong skaters, so most officials are now former players. As the women's game has grown, more skaters from the women's side have sought paths to stay in the game. Gutauskas began her officiating career as a side hustle at 14. "Best part-time job for an athlete," she said. "I was still playing hockey and playing sports in university. Exams. Studying. You can kind of make your own schedule and block days."

Eventually, she joined the female arm of Hockey Canada's officiating program. That led to national events and, eventually, the IIHF. Last spring, she called a semifinal game at the Women's World Championship. Now, she's in consideration for the 2026 Olympics.

MARLOWE SCHOTT, **HILLARY BRENNAN** & LACEY SENUK

Those IIHF games take top priority when Gutauskas lays out her schedule, followed by the PWHL, OHA and women's university hockey. That fills out most of her weekends, augmenting a full-time government job in the Waterloo region. "I'm usually a pretty solid Friday, Saturday, Sunday kind of girl," she said. "Sometimes more, sometimes less. If I'm travelling, it takes some days away."

Right now, more than 40 officials from the OHA roster also work games at higher levels. Pollock hopes to increase that number to 60. The current list includes Senuk and Brennan, who call PWHL and OHL games. Brennan is also in her third year in the AHL, while Senuk has drawn top IIHF assignments, including the 2022 Beijing Olympics.

LAURA **GUTAUSKAS**

Schott may not be far behind. PWHL officiating supervisor Bryan Lewis had a chance to scout her for future assignments when he oversaw the OHA's all-female game. "She knocked it out of the park," Pollock said. "If I can develop the females that we identify in the OHA and get them to the PWHL or get them into the OHL, that's the success story for me."

Women have been working AHL games since 2021 and have attended the NHL's annual combines, where top prospects are identified for promotion. How much longer until we see the first woman don the stripes at hockey's top level? "They're scouring the world for the best officials, and there's been some women identified that are right there," Pollock said. "I think it's a matter of time. It's not 'if,' it's 'when.' " H

RAY MACALONEY/OJHL IMAGES

THE COUNTDOWN

FUTURE WATCH RANKINGS SINCE 2004

Which teams are consistently primed for a bright future? And why does that promise seemingly never come to fruition for many of those organizations? **BY JARED CLINTON**

THE TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS have a gift for inspiring disparate reactions. Thus, when we declared on the cover of Future Watch 2018 that Toronto could "plan the parade," it provoked both excitement and ire. Mostly the latter.

But – and bear with us here – could this be the year? Barring the 2023 Vegas Golden Knights and 2006 Carolina Hurricanes, every Stanley Cup champion in the post-lockout era has had their victory preceded by a top-five finish in our annual Future Watch rankings. All but three of those 17 teams have also climbed to the NHL's summit within nine years of finishing at or near the top of the Future Watch heap. And, finally, those teams' average time-to-title from their nearest top-five FW finish is a shade under six years. By those measures, the Leafs, who placed second in 2019, fit the bill as 2025 Stanley Cup champions – but so do the Hurricanes, who landed in the fifth spot in our 2019 rankings.

If either wins it all, though, it might prove something else entirely: that building a Cup winner comes down to one good crop and not necessarily decades of drafting success. In the following ranking of average Future Watch position over the past 20 years (2004 to 2024), neither Toronto nor Carolina has averaged a top-10 ranking – and clubs that have consistently been tops have won only one Cup in the past five years.

1 ANAHEIM DUCKS

AVERAGE RANKING: 9.00

Only twice in past two decades have the Ducks been outside the top 20 despite long stretch as Western contender.

2 BUFFALO SABRES

AVERAGE RANKING: 10.15

Four top-two picks since 2014. Unfortunately, only a pair – Rasmus Dahlin and Owen Power – remain in Buffalo.

3 COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

AVERAGE RANKING: 10.60

Young, plucky Jackets are hunting for wild-card spot. Years of prime draft choices are finally paying dividends.

4 FLORIDA PANTHERS

AVERAGE RANKING: 11.50

Inverse relationship between on-ice and recent Future Watch success. Thin crop now, but Cup banners hang forever.

5 UTAH HOCKEY CLUB

AVERAGE RANKING: 11.75

Credit GM Bill Armstrong for building from ground up. Pool went from quite empty in 2021 to overflowing by 2024.

6 OTTAWA SENATORS

AVERAGE RANKING: 12.00

Five players from Sens' top-ranked group in 2021 making big impacts as Ottawa seeks to end playoff drought.

CUTTER GAUTHIER

GAUTHIER: PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

7 WINNIPEG JETS

AVERAGE RANKING: 12.30

No top-10 rankings in six years, but that speaks to Jets' prior consistency as kings of draft-and-development model.

8 EDMONTON OILERS

AVERAGE RANKING: 13.45

Oilers sacrificing future to put talent around McDavid and Co. now, which is evident in last-place ranking in 2024.

9 ST. LOUIS BLUES

AVERAGE RANKING: 13.85

Trio of 2023 first-round picks gave Blues' pipeline a much-needed shot in the arm – and the hope of a return to contention.

10 CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

AVERAGE RANKING: 14.20

A combo of Cup-contending, a win-now mentality and mediocre draft-day returns has Hawks where they are today.

11 CAROLINA HURRICANES

AVERAGE RANKING: 14.30

Canes steadily graduate talent to The Show but never had deepest pool. Highest ranking? Fourth, in 2016 and 2011.

12 LOS ANGELES KINGS

AVERAGE RANKING: 14.50

Of the Kings' 10 best prospects in third-ranked 2021 group, headlined by Byfield and Turcotte, only four remain.

LANE
HUTSON

13 PHILADELPHIA FLYERS

AVERAGE RANKING: 14.65

Michkov has proven his worth as last season's top-ranked prospect. Now, Flyers have to add around him.

14 MONTREAL CANADIENS

AVERAGE RANKING: 14.80

No higher than third in past 20 years, but Habs won't fuss over perception when finding steals like Lane Hutson.

15 COLORADO AVALANCHE

AVERAGE RANKING: 15.45

Expect continued slide in Future Watch rankings as Avs haven't had one top-20 draft pick in the past five years.

16 DETROIT RED WINGS

AVERAGE RANKING: 15.55

Though results have been middling under Steve Yzerman, it's hard to argue with young talent he's accumulating.

17 NASHVILLE PREDATORS

AVERAGE RANKING: 16.00

Ninth-ranked crop in 2024 was best in nearly a decade. Preds need help given ugly results throughout this season.

18 WASHINGTON CAPITALS

AVERAGE RANKING: 16.15

Sometimes, it's about finding the right fit. Capitals keep finding solutions to ills through draft and development.

19 NEW YORK RANGERS

AVERAGE RANKING: 16.15

Lafreniere, Kakko and Chytil were big factors in 2021's No. 2 ranking. Four years on, only Lafreniere remains in N.Y.

20 MINNESOTA WILD

AVERAGE RANKING: 16.30

Wild deserve more credit for steadily uncovering big-league talent despite one top-10 pick in past dozen years.

21 BOSTON BRUINS

AVERAGE RANKING: 16.85

Highest finish was fourth in 2018, though the best of the bunch were hidden gems Swayman and Frederic.

22 SEATTLE KRAKEN

AVERAGE RANKING: 17.00

Patience paying off as Shane Wright and Ryker Evans become NHL contributors. Promising returns so far in Seattle.

23 NEW JERSEY DEVILS

AVERAGE RANKING: 18.05

Seven consecutive top-10 rankings after failing to land among the top half of the league over 13 prior editions.

24 NEW YORK ISLANDERS

AVERAGE RANKING: 18.85

Barring a trade, this year would mark first time since 2019 that Isles have a first-round pick in consecutive drafts.

25 DALLAS STARS

AVERAGE RANKING: 19.35

Stars' draft staff deserves high praise. Club continues to find great value with late first- and second-round picks.

28 TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

AVERAGE RANKING: 19.95

These Leafs were built through the draft, but core's arrival was preceded by long period of draft-floor failings.

29 PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

AVERAGE RANKING: 20.90

Seems like Pens will have to shift focus to restocking despite attempt at on-the-fly rebuild to close out Crosby era.

30 CALGARY FLAMES

AVERAGE RANKING: 21.20

It's better than it appears, especially as Flames have had penchant for finding at least one gem per draft day.

QUINN
HUGHES

26 TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

AVERAGE RANKING: 19.40

A bare cupboard is the cost of doing business for Bolts, who have five conference titles and three Cups since 2004.

27 VANCOUVER CANUCKS

AVERAGE RANKING: 19.55

Top end of 2019's third-ranked prospect pool – Hughes, Demko and Pettersson – panned out. The rest? No.

31 VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

AVERAGE RANKING: 21.43

Vegas' management doesn't hesitate to push chips into the middle. That's come at cost of building prospect pool.

32 SAN JOSE SHARKS

AVERAGE RANKING: 23.70

Not once from 2004 to 2024 did the Sharks finish in FW's top 10. New dawn begins in 2025 with No. 1 rank. H

HUTSON: DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES; HUGHES: BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS

Puck CULTURE

FIVE NHLERS IN NON-HOCKEY ACTING ROLES

Who has talent on the ice and the big screen? These five NHL players briefly traded their sticks for scripts **BY SAL BARRY**

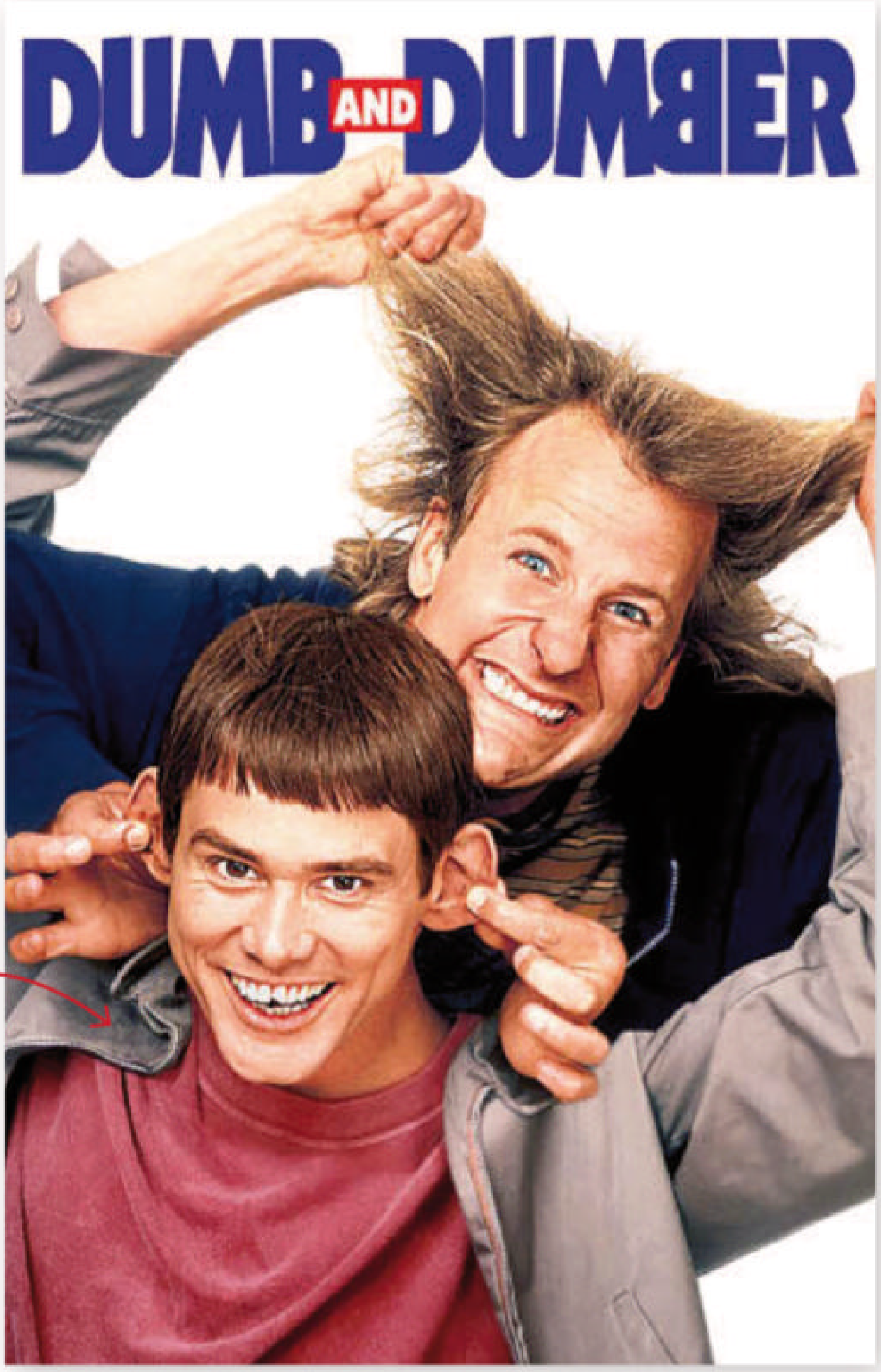
PLAYING A HOCKEY PLAYER in a movie or TV show isn't much of a stretch for an NHLer. Just start rolling the camera and let him do his thing. But to play a non-hockey character – especially one with lines of dialogue – is something special.

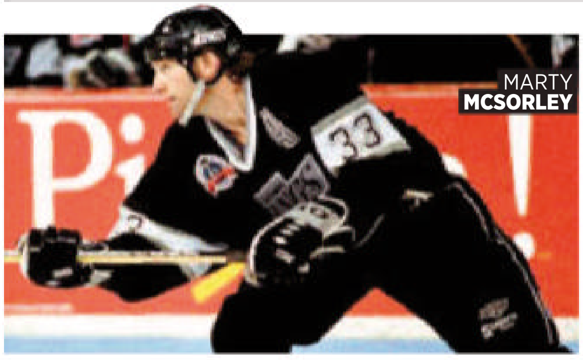
1

> CAM NEELY

Dumb and Dumber (1994)

Bruins legend and current team president Cam Neely had cameo roles as himself in the film *D2: The Mighty Ducks* and the TV series *Beverly Hills, 90210*. He's also appeared in the series *Rescue Me*. But Neely's most memorable part was in the 1994 comedy *Dumb and Dumber*, where he played a truck driver nicknamed 'Sea Bass.' Midway through the film, protagonists/idiots Harry and Lloyd are eating lunch at a diner when Harry tosses a saltshaker over his shoulder for good luck, accidentally hitting Sea Bass in the process. The temperamental trucker gets angry, bullies the two dimwits and then takes Harry's lunch. Later, Sea Bass attempts to beat up Lloyd in a gas station bathroom. Neely reprised his role of Sea Bass 20 years later in the sequel *Dumb and Dumber To* in a post-credits scene.





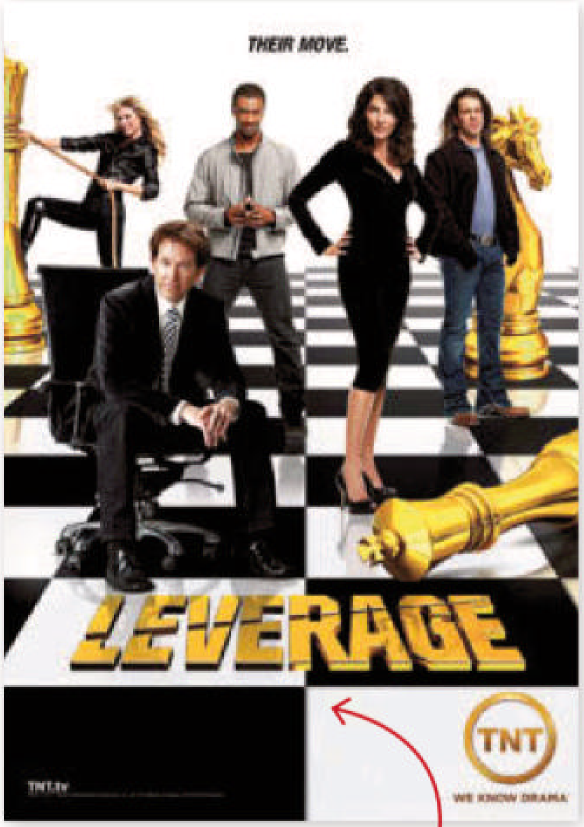
2

> MARTY MCSORLEY

Con Air (1997)

NHL tough guy Marty McSorley had movie roles as a henchman and as a bouncer, which probably weren't too hard for someone whose on-ice job was intimidation. But McSorley also appeared as a good guy in the 1997 action thriller *Con Air*. McSorley played the co-pilot of the titular airplane that gets overrun by the prisoners it's transporting. When a riot breaks out and prisoners attempt the takeover, McSorley's character arms himself and tries to quell the uprising. But he quickly gets overpowered by the main villain, leading to his demise. *Con Air* was produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, who is a hockey fan and now a part-owner of the Seattle Kraken. Other Bruckheimer-backed projects in which McSorley acted include the movie *Bad Boys* and TV series *CSI: Miami*.

NEELY: BRIAN FLUHARTY-USA TODAY SPORTS; MCSORLEY: JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA-USA TODAY SPORTS



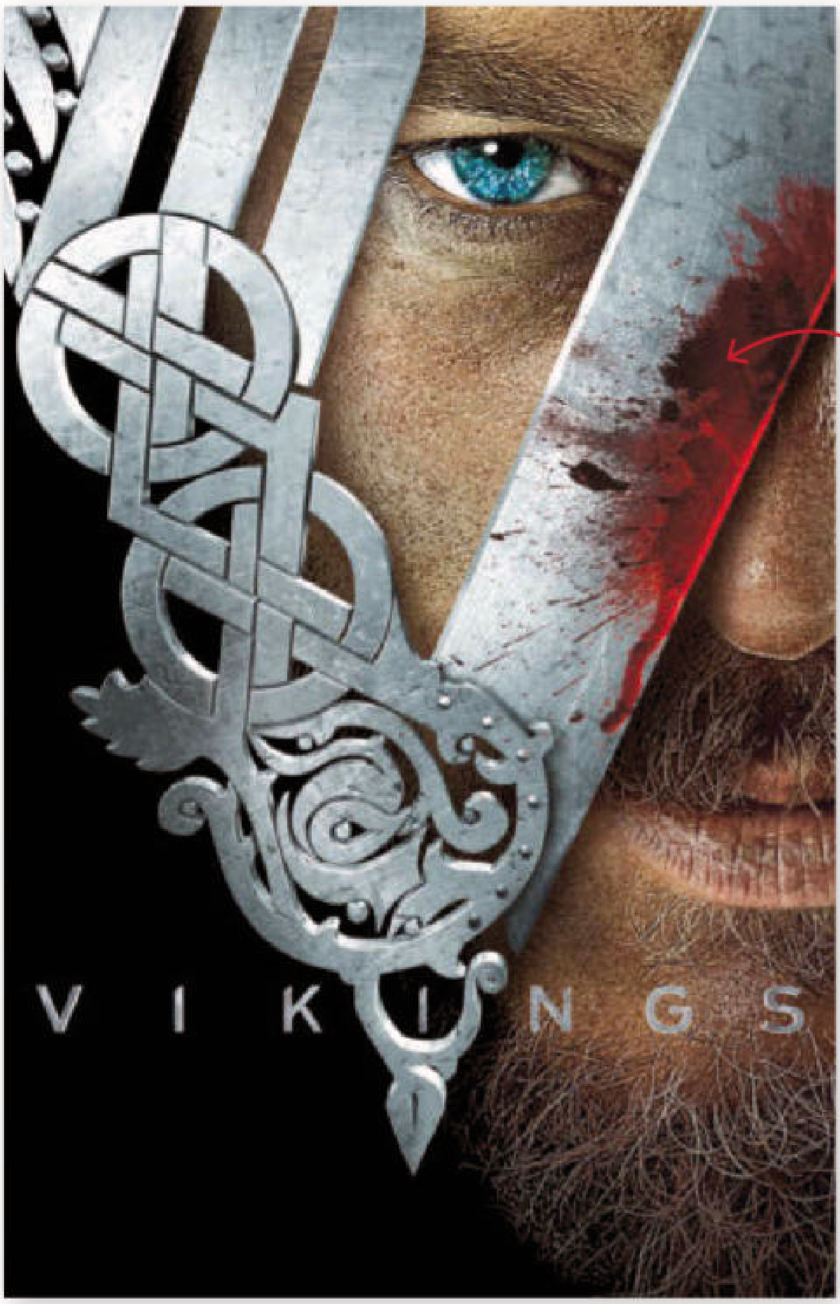
3

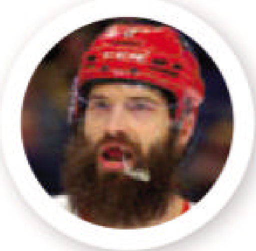
> JEREMY ROENICK

***Leverage* (2009)**

Jeremy Roenick must look good in uniform because he's been cast as a law-enforcement officer several times. He has had roles as a desk sergeant in two episodes of the show *Hack* and as a SWAT officer in the series *Heist*. Not counting appearances where he's played himself, Roenick last had an acting gig in the series *Leverage*, where he played a gullible security guard working the front desk of a high-rise office building. Early in the episode, Roenick's character is easily distracted by a flirtatious French woman – one of the protagonists – as her cohorts infiltrate the building. Later, his character is duped by another good guy who bluffs his way through by posing as a janitor.

CAGE
CUSACK
MALKOVICH
CON AIR
BUCKLE UP.





4

> BRENT BURNS

***Vikings* (2020)**

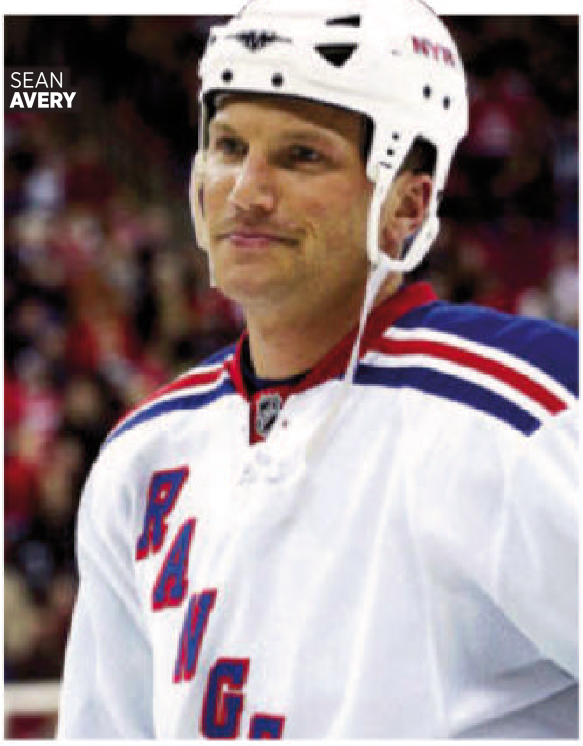
With his imposing stature, gnarly beard and missing teeth, Brent Burns looks like he was born to play a mercenary henchman in the TV series *Vikings*. In two episodes of the historical drama's sixth season, Burns plays the intimidating Skane, a sell-sword hired to lead King Harald's bodyguards. Skane doesn't say much in his first appearance – he just looms large in the background – but he gets down to business in the next episode. Skane learns of Harald's distrust of him and thus plots to murder his boss. Skane speaks some lines and even engages in swordplay. Unfortunately for him, he ends up dying in a rather ghastly fashion. Let's just call it illegal contact to the head...

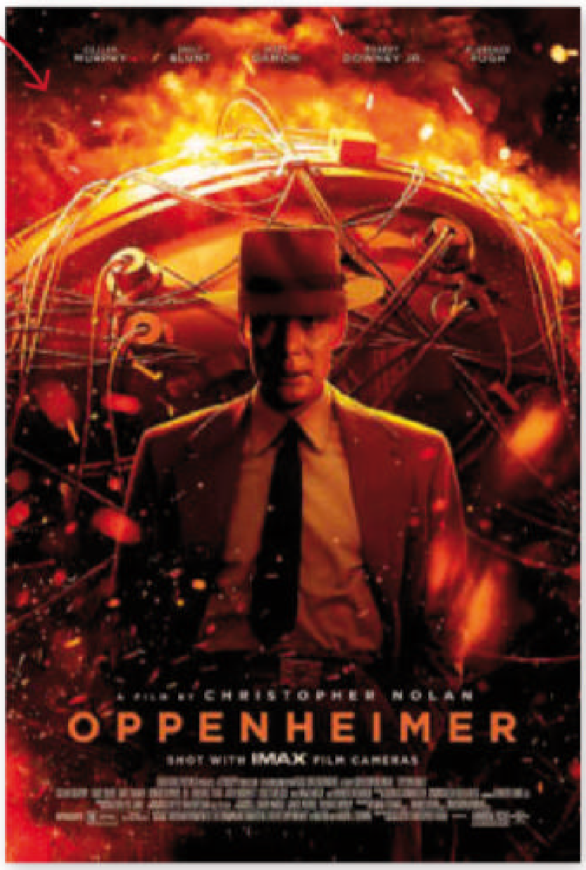
5

> SEAN AVERY

***Oppenheimer* (2023)**

Sean Avery's first acting role was in 2005 as a player in the Maurice Richard biopic *The Rocket*. Since retiring from hockey, Avery has diversified his roles a bit, though he often gets cast as a military-type character. Avery played an army weatherman in the 2023 film *Oppenheimer*, which won the Oscar for Best Picture. In the role, Avery's character speaks with the main characters about the storm that rages over the testing site the night before the historic nuclear bomb test. Although he had to audition for the part, Avery already had a prior connection with *Oppenheimer* director Christopher Nolan – he played a soldier in Nolan's 2020 sci-fi flick *Tenet*.


SEAN **AVERY**


A FILM BY CHRISTOPHER NOLAN
OPPENHEIMER
SHOT WITH IMAX FILM CAMERAS

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MARILYN & MIKE **BROPHY**

LIFE'S BETTER WITH 'BROPH'

Former THN senior writer Mike Brophy is always there to provide a laugh, whether intentional or not. Now, he needs help from others as he battles for his life **BY KEN CAMPBELL**

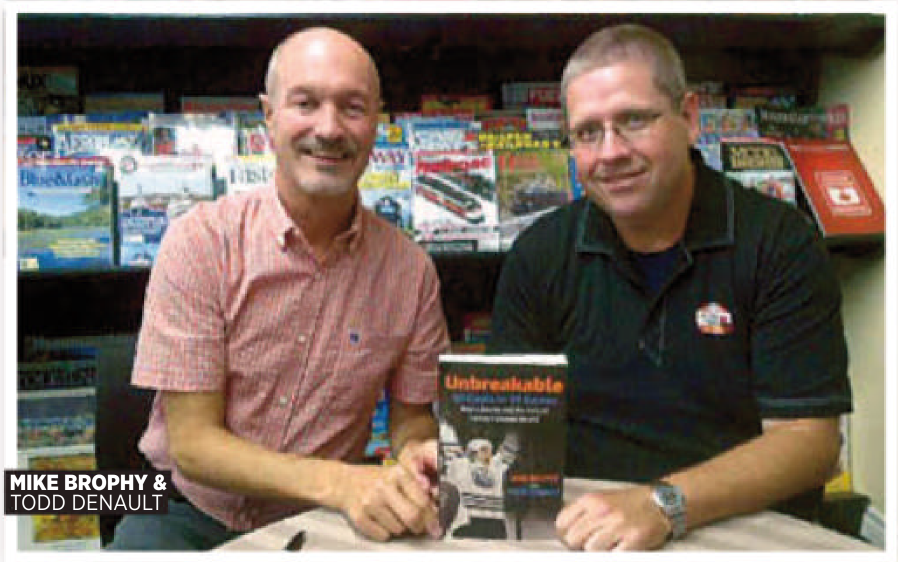
BACK IN THE DAY, The Hockey News published a guide to summer hockey schools. It was an April 1 in the 1990s, and one of the advertising representatives nervously walked into editor in chief Steve Dryden's office with a professional-looking mock-up of an ad for an enterprise called the "Fight Right Hockey School." NHL enforcers would be the instructors, and the school would teach your Little Johnny to drop the mitts and throw haymakers.

KEN CAMPBELL

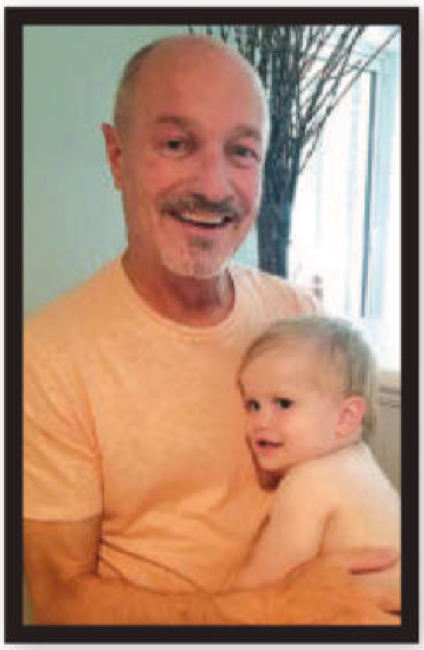
As Dryden turned about 14 different shades of crimson, he could only say, "This is a joke. This is a joke." Then, realizing the date on the calendar, the ardent anti-fighting advocate sighed heavily and said, "This *is* a joke." In the background, giggling uncontrollably, was THN's senior writer Mike Brophy, who had orchestrated the entire scheme.

'Broph' has a million of 'em. Sometimes, they're even intentional. There was the time we were doing a spoof issue that had a photo of Dryden holding a baby. Broph got the idea that Paul Kariya's head should be superimposed on the infant. Other times, Broph was hilarious, but not on purpose. During the lockout that wiped out the 2004-05 NHL season, he was sent to Rimouski to do a story on a junior phenom named Sidney Crosby. As he often does, the directionally challenged Broph got lost while driving in rural Quebec and called the office. "*Est* is west, right?" he asked. On another occasion, he was still in the office at about 1 p.m., with a plane ticket on his desk that indicated he had a flight that was due to leave at 14:00. " 'Hey Broph, you know your flight leaves at 2 p.m., right?' " he was asked. " 'No, it doesn't leave until 4,' " was his response. Once it was explained to him, he scurried out of the office, muttering something about, "F---in' Navy time."

Broph came to The Hockey News via the *Peterborough Examiner* in 1992 and stuck around for 17 years before leaving to do TV. That makes him one of the longest-serving staffers in the history of THN. And anyone who worked with him during that time would also vouch for the notion that he was one of the best. It's actually apropos that we're publishing this in the annual Future Watch edition because, well, our future is better with Broph in it. But Broph is currently in the fight of his life. He desperately needs a kidney, since his are currently functioning at about eight percent efficiency.



MIKE BROPHY & TODD DENAULT



He was diagnosed with IgA nephropathy more than 20 years ago when he tried to get a life insurance policy. He has fought the good fight for the better part of two decades, but things have taken a downward turn in the past year. Now 67 and living in Ottawa, Broph faces the prospect of dialysis, but that is only a temporary fix until a donor kidney becomes available. "I'm in the worst phase now," he said. "I feel pretty good, but life sometimes gives you the middle finger. The first kidney doctor I went to 20 years ago said, 'You won't live a long life unless they come up with a cure,' and they don't even know what causes kidney disease. But now they told me that if I get a kidney, I could live another 20 to 25 years."

And therein lies the challenge. The waitlist for a deceased donor is too long for his condition, so he requires a living donor. Anyone with the blood type 'O' or 'A' could be a potential donor, but even those with other types of blood can enroll in the Kidney Paired Donation Program, where those in Broph's circle who offer a kidney to another person in need of a donor move him up the list and increase his chances of getting his own donor.

Broph has two grandchildren, seven and 10, and like any grandparent, he wants to see them do grandkid things like go off to college and get married. It's taken a lot for him to put out an appeal. It's not something he would do unless the situation were desperate. "I'm not going to go up to someone and say, 'Hey, can I have your kidney?' " he said. "It's just not in my DNA."

So, we'll do it for him. Anyone wishing to register can do so at tohlivingkidneydonation.com or calling the Ottawa Hospital at 613-738-8400 ext. 82719.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARILYN BROPHY

CAROLINA HURRICANES

SEBASTIAN
AHO
ANDREI
SVECHNIKOV
SETH
JARVIS
JACKSON
BLAKE
JALEN
CHATFIELD
ALEXANDER
NIKISHIN

AHO: JAMES GUILLORY-USA TODAY SPORTS; SVECHNIKOV JARVIS: JAMES GUILLORY-IMAGN IMAGES; CHATFIELD: JAMIE SABAU-USA TODAY SPORTS; BLAKE: JEROME MIRON-IMAGN IMAGES; NIKISHIN: YURI KUZMIN, KHL

THE PERFECT STORM

Despite their status as a Stanley Cup favorite, the Carolina Hurricanes have built a prospect pipeline that consistently churns out NHL talent through heady scouting, deft draft-day maneuvering and fantastic player development

BY JARED CLINTON

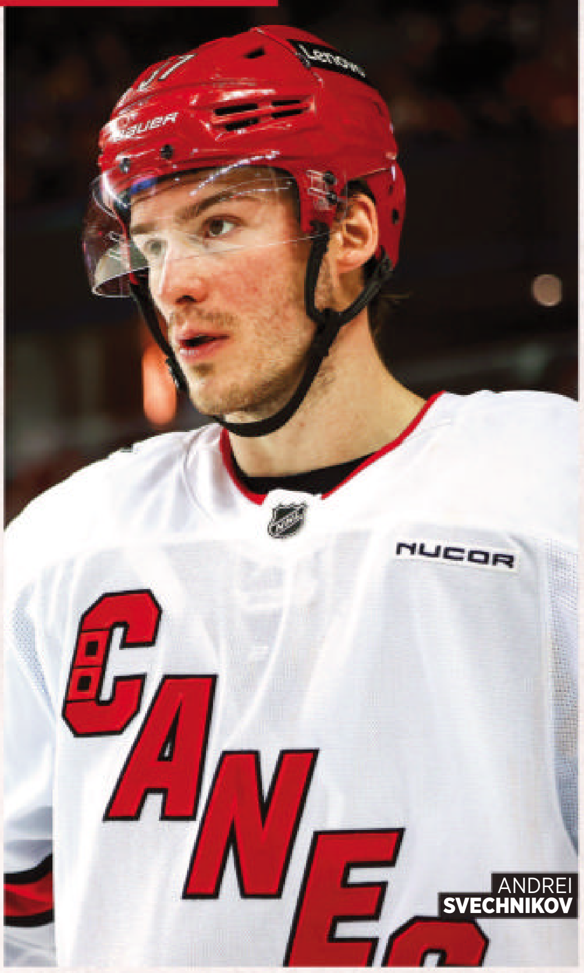
IT'S THREE DAYS BEFORE the Carolina Hurricanes complete the blockbuster acquisition of all-star right winger Mikko Rantanen – we'll get back to that in a second – when Darren Yorke picks up the phone to talk all things picks, prospects and player development. And, to be clear, no one in the organization is more qualified to speak on the subject than Yorke, the Hurricanes' associate GM.

For more than 15 years now, Yorke has stalked the halls of Carolina's front office. He arrived in 2010 as a video scout, rose to director of scouting in 2017, moved on to become the director of player personnel the following year and was the Hurricanes' assistant GM for the past four seasons before earning his latest promotion in August. Given his CV, it's safe to say Yorke's experiences have run the gamut. Where he has done some of his best work, however, is running point on the Hurricanes' drafts. It has helped, of course, that almost no one has had as many darts to throw at the board.

While it's generally believed that compiling draft capital goes hand in hand with league-basement finishes, Carolina has, in recent years, bucked the trend. Since 2005-06, there have been 11 instances of a franchise posting a .650-or-greater points percentage in four consecutive seasons. The Hurricanes are among that cohort, with last season's 111-point campaign the fourth in a row in which Carolina eclipsed the aforementioned points rate. And yet, the Hurricanes have made 40 draft

YONE IN
DEWAR
24

COST EFFECTIVE
Jarvis is the latest example of a Canes pick who was able to step in and contribute on his entry-level deal.


ANDREI **SVECHNIKOV**

selections in the past four off-seasons. That is the second-most of any team since 2020, only two fewer than the Utah Hockey Club/Arizona Coyotes. It's also 10 picks more than any other team with a similar stretch of regular-season success in the post-lockout era.

Yorke, though, wants to make clear that Carolina isn't simply hoarding draft choices. "We'll do whatever we can to make the team better," he said. "Obviously, that's simplified, but there are times that we have used picks and prospects to make the NHL team better when the cost has been there."

Which brings us back to Rantanen, for whom the cost, it seems, was indeed there. Acquired alongside Taylor Hall and Nils Juntorp, Rantanen cost a pretty penny. The price tag to nab Rantanen from the Colorado Avalanche was Martin Necas, Jack Drury, a 2025 second-round pick and a 2026 fourth-round selection. For including Hall, throwing in Juntorp and eating half of Rantanen's salary, the Hurricanes also had to send a 2025 third-round choice the Chicago Blackhawks' way.

And this isn't the first instance of Carolina going all-out to land a top target.

Last season, the Canes used conditional first- and fifth-round picks as well as prospects Vasily Ponomarev, Ville Koivunen and Cruz Lucius to snag the deadline's big-ticket item, Jake Guentzel, from the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Executing deals like those for Rantanen and Guentzel is ultimately made possible by Carolina's cache of draft choices and the work done with those selections by Yorke and the Hurricanes staff. It's the wealth of prospects that allowed the Hurricanes to leverage three up-and-comers for Guentzel. Likewise, it's because Carolina has confidence in what is on the way that the club can part with homegrown talents Necas and Drury. And despite putting a bow on both packages with picks, the Hurricanes haven't come out worse for wear. That's not by happenstance. Rather, it's Carolina working to "maximize the draft," as Yorke calls it.

Indeed, while Carolina may trade away picks during the season, management often works to refill the coffers on draft day. Since 2020, the Hurricanes have made 11 picks-for-picks swaps during the draft, trading away 11 choices and receiving 19 in return. "If there's an opportunity to trade back and accumulate more picks, we'll do it," Yorke said.

The method to the Hurricanes' madness is rooted in the numbers. Perhaps that's unsurprising given Carolina's GM Eric Tulsky, a Harvard graduate with a Ph.D in chemistry from the University of California, is regarded as one of the more forward-thinking front-office minds in the NHL. (It was Yorke, by the way, who led the charge

> "WE'LL DO WHATEVER WE CAN TO MAKE THE TEAM BETTER
>
> – ASSOCIATE GM DARREN YORKE

MIKKO **RANTANEN**

JARVIS: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; SVECHNIKOV: SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES; RANTANEN: BRAD PENNER-IMAGN IMAGES

“IF YOU WANT TO HAVE SUSTAINED SUCCESS, YOU NEED YOUR DRAFT PICKS TO COME IN AND DO THEIR JOB AT THE NHL LEVEL, ESPECIALLY ON THEIR ELC

– DARREN YORKE

to bring in Tulsky as an analyst for the Hurricanes in 2014.)

As the theory goes, a value can be assigned to each draft choice to get “a probabilistic chance of whether that pick is going to turn into an NHL star or all-star, however you want to quantify it,” Yorke explained. Trading down to acquire an additional pick or picks often generates more overall value. But it’s not a perfect science. “When it comes to the draft, you try to make informed bets,” Yorke said. “At the same time, we also know that if you want to have sustained success in the NHL, you need your draft picks to come in there and be able to do their job at the NHL level, especially on their entry-level contract.”

The Hurricanes have been blessed to unearth such players. Sebastian Aho arrived in 2016 and was Carolina’s top scorer over the course of his entry-level deal. Andrei Svechnikov went from second-overall pick to 20-goal scorer in a 12-month span. The most recent example, and one for which Yorke gets full marks, is Seth Jarvis. Picked 13th overall in 2020, Jarvis clawed his way into the Hurricanes’ 2021-22 lineup and has since become a top-line force. But the Ahos, Svechnikovs and Jarvises are the exceptions, not the rule. As Yorke intimated, there are no sure things in the draft.

There are ways to mitigate risk, though, and none better than having staff who can guide players from draft day into the system and on to the NHL. That’s where Peter Harrold comes in.

Arriving in Carolina in 2020 as a skills coach, Harrold has risen rapidly through the organization to become the director of player development. That Harrold had a nine-year, 274-game NHL career and played another 255 games in the AHL gives him a wealth of experience he can pass on to prospects and NHL regulars alike.

But Yorke said communication, not his background, is what sets Harrold apart. “He’s an incredibly intelligent individual,” Yorke said. “He’s able to blend old school and new school and shape and tailor that message to the individual so they can digest it and ultimately change their behaviors or their workouts to get to where they need to go.”

One doesn’t need to look further than Jalen Chatfield or Jackson Blake to see where the efforts of Harrold and the Hurricanes’ development staff have borne fruit.

When the undrafted Chatfield, now 28, signed with the Hurricanes prior to 2021-22, he did so on a two-way deal, played only 16 games with the big club and was not pegged as an eventual NHL mainstay. But a few seasons’ work under Harrold and the rest of Carolina’s development staff has transformed Chatfield into a reliable middle-pairing fixture on a deep D-corps.

Then there’s Blake. Selected in the fourth round, 109th overall in 2021 – a pick, it’s worth noting, the Hurricanes acquired from the Los Angeles Kings by moving back on Day 2 of the draft – Blake has, in four years, gone from high-school star to USHL stand-

JACKSON BLAKE

BLAKE: JAMES GUILLORY-IMAGN IMAGES

JACKSON **BLAKE**

out to Hobey Baker Award finalist and on to NHL regular. The 21-year-old has taken his offensive skill set and added new elements to become a valuable bottom-six piece, and Carolina has been impressed by his somewhat seamless transition.

The fact that the Hurricanes have been able to develop mid-round picks like Blake and perceived fringe talents like Chatfield into contributors to a Stanley Cup-contending club is a testament to the players, yes, but also to the attributes the front office actively seeks.

"You want guys that want it, and we have a lot of them," Harrold said. "Some of that is the culture that has been built in Carolina, where (coach Rod Brind'Amour) wants a workmanlike mentality, and I think our amateur scouts try to draft guys and our pro scouts try to find guys that have that mentality, that fit the organization."

What has made it easier for Harrold to continue shaping Carolina's next generation – and what has allowed Yorke and Co. to keep a more watchful eye on their progress – is having a proper feeder. Spending last season without a dedicated AHL affiliate resulted in the Hurricanes scattering talent throughout the hockey ecosystem. That resulted in six different AHL clubs housing Carolina-owned players at various points throughout last season. Bent on avoiding that situation again, the Hurricanes signed a three-year affiliation agreement with the AHL's Chicago Wolves last May.

It's a deal that gave Carolina management oversight and sees Yorke act as the farm club's GM. "We want to be able to ensure we can put the players through the type of practices, the systems, the workouts that we have and can continue to monitor and give the players the feedback that they want and they need to get to the NHL," Yorke said.

That's all the more important given the demands of the Hurricanes' play style. Any NHL development team or AHL coaching staff will acknowledge that the extreme degree of defensive responsibility required at the professional level is the biggest hurdle facing young players. Harrold is in that camp, too. But he notes it can be equally challenging for players to get accustomed to Carolina's tempo and intensity. "It's a demanding system that a lot of guys are not ready for," he said. "The adjustment to that system is absolutely part of the development process for us…We don't take a breath. We just go, and we go, and we go."

That is partly why the Hurricanes are so happy to let their top prospects marinate longer in the AHL, even when those players appear ready for a taste of NHL action.

Such is the case for 2021 second-round pick Scott Morrow, who departed UMass at the end of last season, saw two games with the Hurricanes and has spent the 2024-25 campaign in Chicago. By the AHL's all-star break, Morrow, 22, was leading rookie blue-

MAYBE TOO MORROW

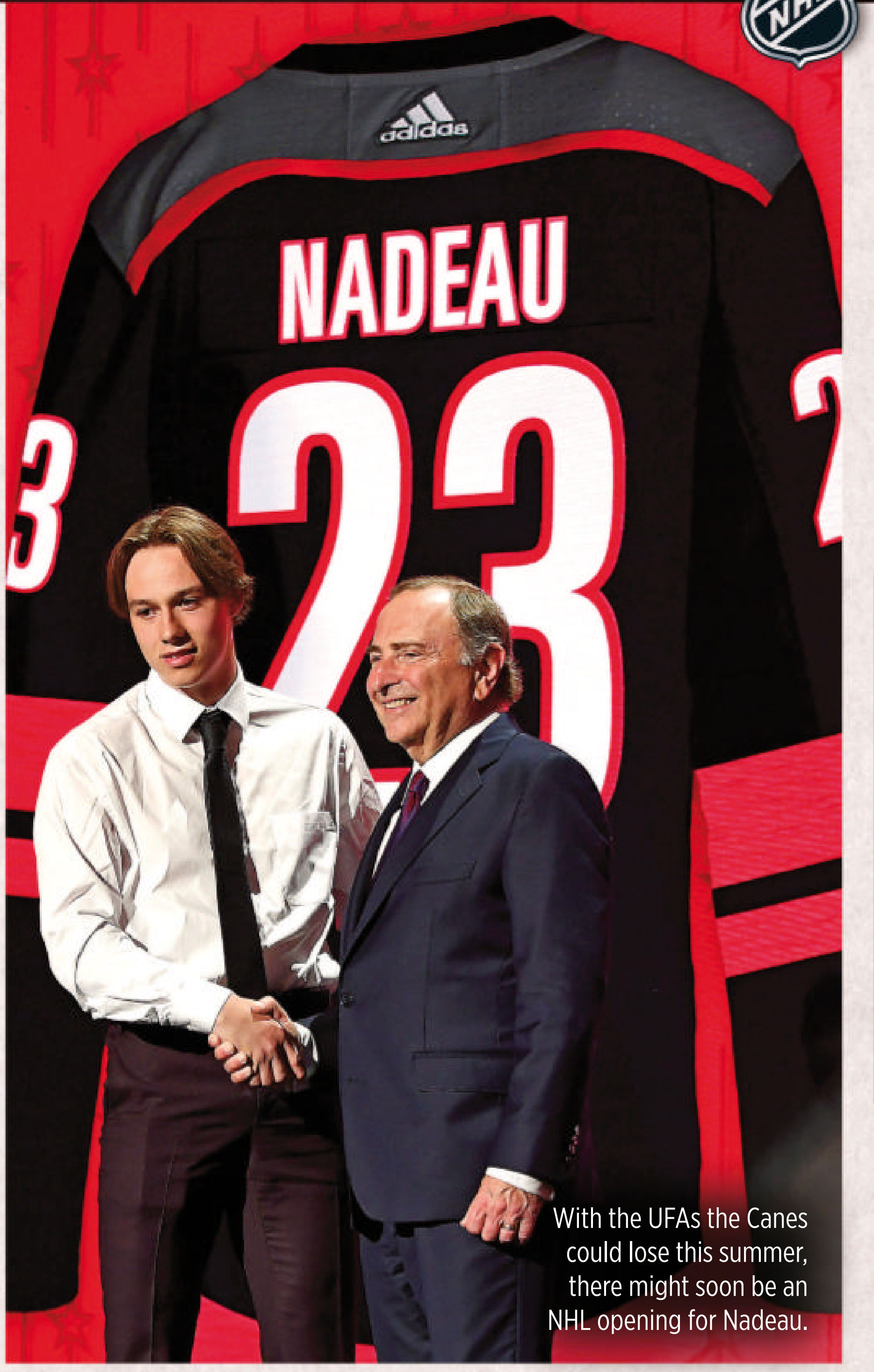
Carolina's deep roster has allowed the AHL's top-producing rookie D-man to get more seasoning.

PETER **HARROLD**

> **IT'S A DEMANDING SYSTEM THAT A LOT OF GUYS ARE NOT READY FOR. WE JUST GO, AND WE GO, AND WE GO**
>
> **– DIR. OF PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PETER HARROLD**

BLAKE: JAMES GUILLORY-IMAGN IMAGES; MORROW: ROSS DETTMAN/CHICAGO WOLVES; HARROLD: RYAN HENKEL

JALEN **CHATFIELD**


With the UFAs the Canes could lose this summer, there might soon be an NHL opening for Nadeau.

liners in scoring and was five points back of the lead among all rearguards. Similarly, left winger Bradly Nadeau, 19, might in another organization be knocking on the door of NHL minutes given his AHL production – he was tied for fifth in scoring among rookies and was the Wolves' leading goal-scorer as of mid-February. But the reality of being a young gun in a contending team's system is that opportunities are limited.

One player primed to skip past the AHL bedding-in period, however, is Alexander Nikishin. Picked in the third round (69th overall) in 2020, Nikishin has had a stunning evolution since his draft year, with the 23-year-old having been on a stark upward trajectory since moving to SKA St. Petersburg in 2022. Nikishin has led KHL defensemen in scoring in each of the past two seasons and entered February on pace to set a career-best goal total and crack the 40-point plateau for a third consecutive season.

The hope is to bring him to the NHL as soon as his season ends in St. Petersburg, and the excitement is evident. "We've watched the maturation of him, going from the draft to where he is now, to being one of if not the best defenseman in the KHL," Yorke said. "He has a blend of offense and blend of physical presence that is really unmatched at the KHL level."

> **“ YOU WANT GUYS THAT WANT IT, AND WE HAVE A LOT OF THEM** – PETER HARROLD

ALEXANDER **NIKISHIN**

There is every possibility Nikishin could be joined in the NHL next season by the likes of Morrow, Nadeau and other promising prospects such as 2023 second-rounder Felix Unger Sorum. On the back end, Brent Burns and Dmitry Orlov are set to become UFAs. And, including Rantanen and Hall, six of Carolina's lineup regulars up front will be out of contract.

The Hurricanes will, without question, make a big-money play to retain Rantanen, but the door will be open for players on entry-level deals to step in and become difference-makers. And they will do so if Carolina's brass believes they can be part of the grander scheme: contending not just this season – and not just next season – but well into the future.

Because all of this – from leveraging draft capital and making "informed bets" to creating the ecosystem for and putting care and consideration into player development – is in service of the Hurricanes' ultimate goal. "It's really trying to make the team as good as possible," Yorke said, "for as long as possible." H

CHATFIELD: RICK OSENTOSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; NADEAU: CHRISTOPHER HANEWINCKEL-USA TODAY SPORTS; NIKISHIN: YURI KUZMIN, KHL

IVAN DEMIDOV

If the uber-talented **Ivan Demidov** can play the Lafleur role in Montreal's impressive cadre of prospects, then GM Kent Hughes will be the 'happiest man in the world.' And the rabid Habs fan base will surely share in that sentiment

BY KEN CAMPBELL

ONE HUNDRED AND TEN years ago, Lt.-Col. John McCrae wrote *In Flanders Fields* after the funeral of a close friend who had died in battle in the First World War. More than 30 years later, Montreal Canadiens GM Frank Selke absconded the famous line, "To you from

XXXXKUZMIN/KHL PHOTO

BE THE GUY

YURY KUZMIN/KHL PHOTO

СКА
PLOTNIKOV
16
CCM

failing hands we throw the torch. Be yours to hold it high." And for almost 75 years, that line has greeted Canadiens players as they've entered the team's dressing room, either in the Forum or the Bell Centre. It's there to remind them of the greatness that has preceded them and their responsibility to uphold the standard that was established by the franchise's icons.

Generations of players have done their parts, but wooboy there have been some rough years lately. With a few notable exceptions, young Canadiens players have spent the better part of the past 20 years or so handling the torch like it was a book of matches from a Crescent Street strip club that someone had inadvertently set on fire. There have been some hits, lots of misses and a team that has been among the top 20 in the NHL only once in the past five years. Of course, they finished 18th that year and made it to the Stanley Cup final, so there's that.

Canadiens GM Kent Hughes remembers the glory days. Larry Robinson's son played minor hockey with him in Beaconsfield, and Jacques Lemaire's kid played with Hughes' younger brother, Ryan. And what the Canadiens are building right now is not the 1970s dynasty that Hughes and his brother idolized, but it's something. Lane Hutson, Kaiden Guhle and David Reinbacher will never be confused with Robinson, Serge Savard and Guy Lapointe, but they're really good. Nick Suzuki probably isn't Lemaire, but work with us. Cole Caufield could stand in for Steve Shutt and Juraj Slafkovsky or Michael Hage for Pete Mahovlich. Nobody is saying Owen Beck and Oliver Kapanen are the next Bob Gainey and Doug Jarvis, but let's use our imaginations here. Arber Xhekaj as Pierre Bouchard? Sure. (Just keep him away from the modern-day Stan Jonathan.) People are saying great things about Jacob Fowler, the same way they did about Cayden Primeau at the same age, but the kid is putting up Ken Dryden-like numbers at Boston College.

And then there's Ivan Demidov, star of YouTube and the single-season under-20 scoring leader in KHL history. He plays right wing. So did Guy Lafleur. So, let's imagine the

FALLING TO FIFTH
Demidov was projected to go as high as second overall. The Habs aren't complaining.

> **HIS ABILITY TO MOVE LATERALLY SUDDENLY IS ONE OF HIS CALLING CARDS** – KENT HUGHES

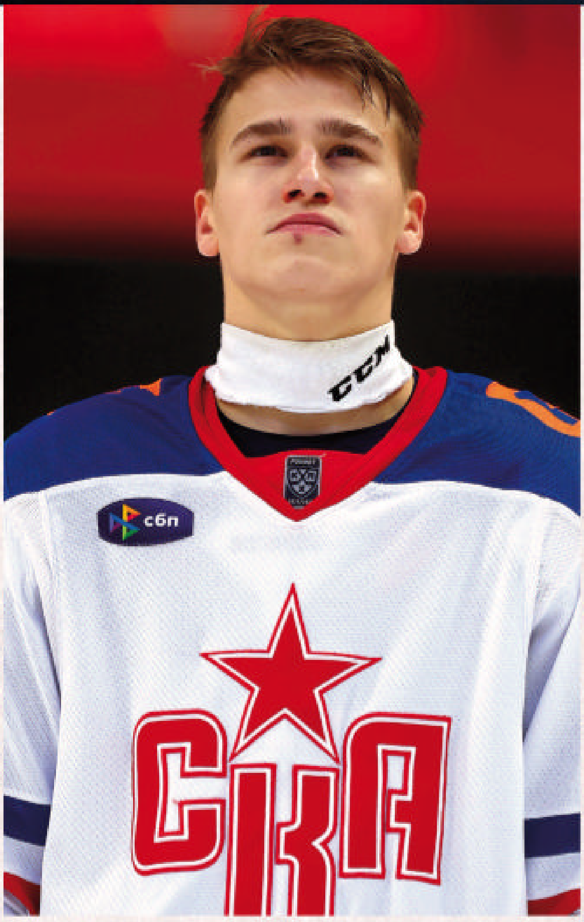
possibilities. The thing that sports sells better than anything is hope, so let's give this a go. What if Demidov becomes the dynamic, lift-you-out-of-your-seat scoring star the Canadiens have lacked for decades? And what if the rest of them come together and hit their career peaks simultaneously? Hey, even a poor man's 1970s dynasty could win the Stanley Cup in today's parity-ravaged NHL. "I can tell you that if you made those comparisons and you were right," Hughes said, "you'd be talking to the happiest man in the world."

Which brings us back to Demidov, who fell to the Canadiens when they were picking fifth overall in the 2024 NHL draft and who has since emerged as the world's No. 1 NHL-affiliated prospect. There's a video going around in which Canadiens executive VP of hockey operations Jeff Gorton asks Demidov in his draft interview if the team would be crazy to pass on him at their position, and Demidov confirms they would be. Demidov is making them look pretty good, which is probably why the Canadiens allowed the video to surface.

Demidov doesn't have Lafleur's shirt-flapping speed – he probably doesn't spark up a heater between periods, either – but he's deadly in the scoring areas. His sense of deception is sublime, and he can make a puck find the net while negotiating its way past multiple sets of shin pads. Nobody in KHL history – not Kirill Kaprizov, not Matvei Michkov – has as many points in a teenage season as Demidov has so far in 2024-25. All that is great, but Hughes is most impressed with how Demidov has handled the situation with his KHL team in St. Petersburg, being sat out of the lineup by coach Roman Rotenberg, then playing sparingly early in the season. He has figured it out, which means the Canadiens have been handed a bit of a development gift in the tough love that Rotenberg has shown Demidov.

In December, Hughes accompanied Canadiens head amateur scout Nick Bobrov and special consultant Vincent Lecavalier (along with Demidov's agent, Dan Milstein) on a multi-pronged mission to assure Demidov that his early-season

TOP: STEPHEN R. SYLVANIE-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: ILYA SMIRNOV/KHL PHOTO



TOP: YURY KUZMIN/KHL PHOTO; RIGHT: ILYA SMIRNOV/KHL PHOTO

struggles were not a concern to them and to find out from Rotenberg what Demidov had to improve upon to get more playing time.

"To be honest, some of the stuff they were asking him to do, as much as it made for some frustrating times for him, it's probably going to help his transition to North America," Hughes said. "With any young prospect, before you have complete control over their development, you want them in an environment where the things being asked of them are productive in terms of making them better future NHL players. The ice time was not ideal, and he couldn't do what they were asking of him if he wasn't playing."

So, fans of the Canadiens – and there are apparently a few of them – watch the regular postings of Demidov's most recent exploits in a league where Josh Leivo is the leading scorer and they wonder whether the parade is going to go the usual route down Rue Ste-Catherine. Since Demidov's contract with SKA expires on May 31, it's assumed that he'll be in the Habs' lineup next season. And there's a good chance he will be. The Laval Rocket had the best points percentage in the AHL at the all-star break, and, hey, it's not out of the question that Demidov could sign with the Canadiens and join the Rocket for their playoff run. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Both Hughes and Milstein are loath to talk about when the NHL might see Demidov because, well, Russia. Both will breathe a huge sigh of relief when the young man sets foot in Montreal.

But for now, the Canadiens are thrilled he's turned his season around, and good things are on the horizon. When Hughes watches Demidov play, both in person and on video, he sees a player with a unique set of skills and the ability to control his edges like few other players. "His ability to move laterally suddenly is one of his calling cards," Hughes said. "It makes him so elusive. Ivan doesn't skate at the high speeds Connor McDavid does, but he cuts and moves from right to left, and the amount he covers is significant. He can score, but he also has the ability to see plays and make plays. He has a lot of qualities that we think are going to allow him to be successful in the NHL."

Hughes waits a second or two, then adds, "And very different. Not the kind of player you see every day." That makes the Canadiens excited for the time when they can start seeing him every day. H

GYM DANDY
Though he's just 19, Demidov has plenty of muscle on his six-foot, 192-pound frame.

BECKETT SENNECKE

WHAT THE...

There have already been a few off-ice head-scratching moments in **Beckett Sennecke's** career. And when he adds muscle to his 6-foot-4 frame, you can expect plenty of on-ice jaw-dropping feats

BY KEN CAMPBELL

THE HOCKEY GODS SAID there'd be days like these, so it's not as though the young man was terribly surprised or upset. At an Oshawa Generals' home game in the dog days of the season, those same hockey gods took a break from the season-long heater that Beckett Sennecke was on to deliver him the game's version of a week-old egg salad sandwich.

Not only was his team taken to the woodshed by the tune of 6-1 to a far inferior OHL squad, but Sennecke had one of those days where absolutely nothing went right. In the first period, he was sprung for a breakaway, only to bobble the puck before almost going face-first into the end boards. He completely whiffed on two one-timers on the power play and had another shot hit the inside of the post. He thought it was in. The officials respectfully disagreed. He led all players with six shots on goal that night, and all he had to show for it was a minus-two. "You get those games," Sennecke said. "You get games where everything goes in and the ones where nothing goes in."

As far as bumps in the road, there haven't been too many of them of late for Sennecke. But there have been some craters, to be sure. An injury suffered in Game 6 of the Eastern Conference final forced him to miss the OHL championship, where his teammates fell to the London Knights in four. And, of course, he was one of the highest-profile cuts of Canada's team for the 2025 world juniors. More on that later.

And there have been some great moments, probably the best of which came at the Sphere in Las Vegas when the Anaheim Ducks shocked both Sennecke and the hockey world by taking him third overall in the 2024 NHL draft. What followed was one of the most authentic and genuine reactions a kid has ever had to being drafted. Upon the selection, made by Ducks legend Scott Niedermayer, Sennecke turned to his parents and said, "Oh my God. Oh my God," then came up with, "What the f---?" before hugging his father. It was *the* moment of the draft,

'OH MY GOD. OH MY GOD'

Sennecke's reaction to being taken third overall turned into a viral sensation and landed him on a team T-shirt.

LEFT: NATALIE SHAVER/OHL IMAGES; TOP: STEPHEN R. SYLVANIE-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: PHOTO BY ANAHEIM DUCKS

BECKETT SENNECKE

> "YOU CAN NEVER TAKE YOUR FOOT OFF THE GAS, AND THERE'S NO RESTING ON YOUR LAURELS
>
> – DUCKS GM PAT VERBEEK

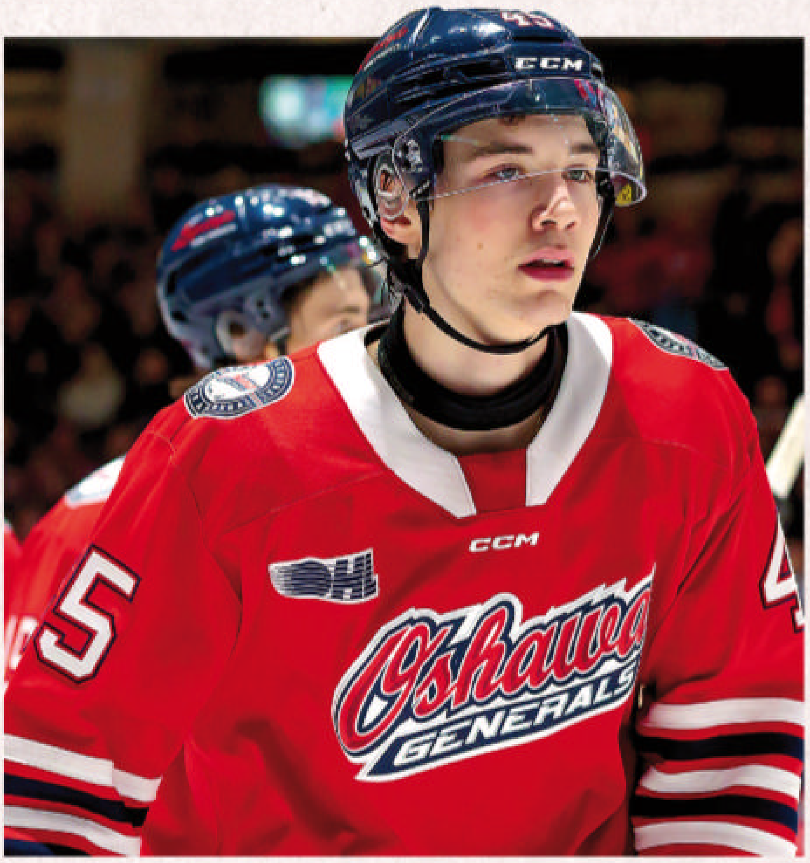
HITS AND MISSES

Despite his surprise high draft selection, Sennecke didn't do enough in camp to make Canada's WJC team.

and the Ducks really leaned into it, producing T-shirts with Sennecke's bewildered look and a caption underneath that read, "What the..." followed by the Ducks logo. "My mom and people in my family bought a few of them," Sennecke said. "It was good fun. It was a great moment that will stick with me for the rest of my life."

Many hockey people had the same reaction – and asked the same question – when Sennecke was cut from Canada's WJC team in December. It was interesting because, in the case of Sennecke and WHL scoring leader Andrew Cristall in particular, the second-guessing began the moment the cuts were announced and only intensified as Canada struggled to create offense in the tournament before losing in the quarterfinal. In retrospect, Sennecke brings exactly what the team lacked: a bigger guy who goes hard to the net and has a dangerous shot. In the four games prior to the selection camp, Sennecke had 14 points, and in the 13 games after being cut, he racked up 24 points. The fact the OHL named Sennecke as its player of the month for December represented a nice little bit of lemon juice on the wound to the Canadian hockey psyche. It brought up a lot of criticism of how Canada does things for this event, but the reality was that Sennecke didn't do enough during camp to sway the team's brain trust. And Canada has won a ton of gold medals using the same formula in the past. "I told him when it happened, 'Listen, Michael Jordan got cut, and you're not the first guy ever to get cut, even if you felt you deserved to make the team,' " said Ducks GM Pat Verbeek. "And it's a lesson. You can never take your foot off the gas, and there's no resting on your laurels."

HENRY SAMUELI, BECKETT SENNECKE, PAT VERBEEK & MARTIN MADDEN



Unless he makes the Ducks as a full-time NHLer next season, which is unlikely, Sennecke will have an opportunity to make the 2026 WJC team as a front-line player. And, this season, he'll also have the chance to be a part of another long playoff run with the Generals, who were near the top of the OHL's Eastern Conference. For his part, Sennecke doesn't dwell too much on the cut from the Canadian team, reasoning that it gave him a chance to go back to the Gens early and continue his fine season. Certainly, his play after the cut gave no reason to believe he was in the doldrums. Next year, Sennecke could follow the path carved by Oshawa teammate and Colorado Avalanche prospect Calum Ritchie, who spent seven games in the NHL before being sent back to junior and playing for the Canadian team.

As Sennecke emerges from Oshawa's dressing room with matted hair and wearing a hoodie, it's impossible not to notice

LEFT: DAVID REGINEK-USA TODAY SPORTS; MIDDLE: STEPHEN R. SYLVANIE-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: IAN GOODALL/OSHAWA GENERALS

Brown
#3
Defenceman
2011 - 2015
Right Wing
1941 - 1944
TURRANCE 17
SENNECKE 45
MARTIN
GENERALS
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IAN GOODALL/OSHAWA GENERALS

BECKETT SENNECKE

ANAHEIM DUCKS

how slight he is. Verbeek said Sennecke has grown an inch since being drafted, which would make him 6-foot-4, but he's still carrying only about 195 pounds. There is a lot to like there – "Some of it I don't think he even realizes it yet," said Verbeek – in addition to his size. His long body and stick are a magnet for loose pucks, and he's an elite playmaker and finisher in the offensive zone. But much of Sennecke's development over the next few years will come off the ice. "I'm not much of a fortune teller, but the biggest thing is just getting stronger," Sennecke said. "I have a workout plan in-season and in the offseason, (the Ducks) are obviously going to crack down on me, and their biggest focus is on me getting stronger. I even noticed in camp, guys were so much faster and stronger, and you have to be able to win puck battles against those guys."

Sennecke has vaulted himself into the public zeitgeist, but before being chosen, he wasn't even the most famous person in his family. His mother, former Canadian national volleyball team member Candice Olson, is one of North America's top interior designers and was the star of *Divine Design* and *Candice Tells All*, two long-running series that aired on networks that hockey fans generally don't watch. That, however, doesn't mean her son is in touch with his textures and colors and matching drapes. For Sennecke, chartreuse could have been a defenseman named Rick who played for the Canadiens in the 1970s. "My room is a mess most of the time," he said. "She always comes in and starts losing her mind. She's big into lighting, and she always likes it so dim. And I'm like, 'Mom, I can't see my food in front of me. Can we turn the lights up a little?' "

If things go the way both he and the Ducks are hoping, the future will be bright enough that Beckett Sennecke won't have to worry about turning up the lights.

MONSTER DUCK

Sennecke's potential is scary. He has elite offensive skills to go with his 6-foot-4 frame.

> **I'M NOT A FORTUNE TELLER, BUT THE BIGGEST THING IS JUST GETTING STRONGER** – BECKETT SENNECKE

IAN GOODALL/OSHAWA GENERALS

SENNECKE
24

IAN GOODALL/OSHAWA GENERALS

BURNING FLAME

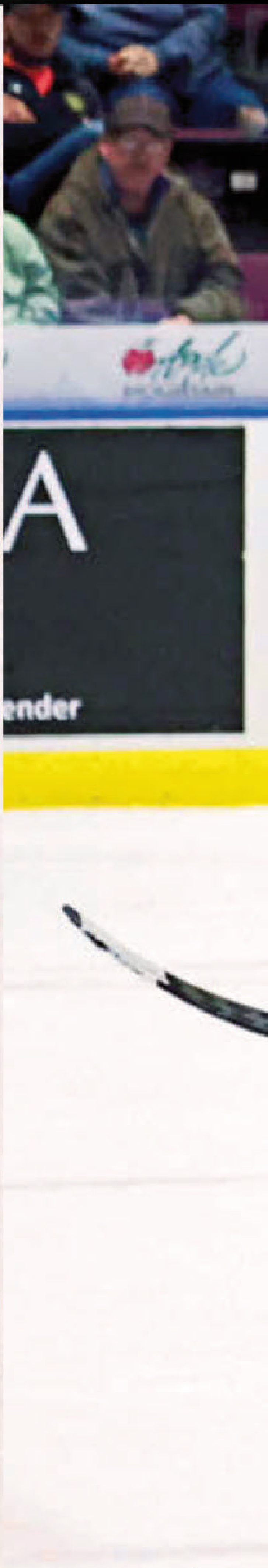
Zayne Parekh is confident to the point of being brash, but that attitude is well-earned with his dominating play. The NHL is on the horizon, and he's intent on making the most of his opportunity to honor his family's sacrifices

BY TONY FERRARI

AT THE 2024 MEMORIAL Cup, held last spring in Saginaw, players from each team were captivated by the skill that opponents brought to the CHL's tournament of champions.

Whether it was Brayden Yager complimenting the work ethic of players on the London Knights, Michael Simpson talking about facing off against high-skilled skaters such as Jagger Firkus or Sam Dickinson heaping praise onto a certain Saginaw defender who he'd been measured up against for the NHL draft, the mutual admiration among peers seemed to be unending.

The defender Dickinson was talking about just so happened to be a player who was completely unfazed by the talent assembling around him, Zayne Parekh. When asked about the talent on opposing teams, Parekh was quick to explain that he wasn't paying much attention to them. It wasn't that he was dismissive of their games. It was just that he was confident that when he was on the ice, he would be the one dictating play, and they would have to be aware of him.



BURN NOTICE

Parekh impressed at camp this year and has his sights set on grabbing a spot with the Flames for 2025-26.

PHOTO BY SAGINAW SPIRIT

NATALIE SHAVER/OHL IMAGES

ZAYNE PAREKH

BIRDS OF PAREKH

With his daring play, the CHL's reigning D-man of the year is a clear offensive driver for his Saginaw Spirit.

Before almost every game at that tournament, just as he regularly has throughout his junior career, Parekh went out on the ice in flip-flops, shorts and a T-shirt well before fans were even in the building. He was working alone with a puck on the blueline, dangling it around and getting a feel for it. A few minutes later, he was firing a few shots on net from the blueline, shaking his head when he missed the cage.

> "I PLAN ON FORCING THE OTHER TEAM TO PLAY IN THEIR OWN ZONE – ZAYNE PAREKH

The blend of confidence that borders on cockiness and habitual introspection has allowed Parekh to become one of junior hockey's most divisive and impressive players. "I don't really worry about what others are doing," Parekh said. "I know my job is to go out there and make a difference whenever I'm on the ice, and I plan on forcing the other team to play in their own zone."

Parekh has always been driven and passionate. He fast-tracked his education, graduating high school at 16 so he could focus on hockey while taking courses with the University of Toronto. He wears his heart on his sleeve on the ice, jawing at opponents and playing the kind of daring, creative hockey that makes him a difference-maker.

That same fire has landed him into trouble a few times as well. He's been suspended on multiple occasions in his OHL career for various infractions. But as the saying goes: it's easier to rein in an intense kid than it is to light a fire under an apathetic one.

Last season, Parekh won a gold medal at the U-18 Hlinka Gretzky Cup. Then, once back in Saginaw, he led all CHL defenders in goals and points en route to being named CHL defenseman of the year, and he helped his Spirit capture their first Memorial Cup.

All of that success culminated on draft day, when he was selected ninth overall by the Calgary Flames. It was another accomplishment to add to his resume, but as he always has, Parekh was looking to get ahead of the curve. One of the first things he mentioned after being drafted was his desire to make the jump immediately. "I want to make an NHL lineup, try and start the season in Calgary," Parekh said. "I know I have a lot of work to do, and I know I have some weight to put on, but that's that plan for me."

Although he didn't accomplish that goal – one that was likely unattainable from the outset – he impressed in rookie camp, as well as in Calgary's main camp, and showed again why he was so highly touted.

PHOTOS BY SAGINAW SPIRIT

> **I WANT TO MAKE AN NHL LINEUP ...I KNOW I HAVE A LOT OF WORK TO DO... BUT THAT'S THAT PLAN FOR ME**
>
> **– ZAYNE PAREKH**

TOP: NATALIE SHAVER/OHL IMAGES; MIDDLE+BOTTOM: PHOTOS BY SAGINAW SPIRIT

Parekh's drive to reach the highest levels of the sport is fuelled by his appreciation for those in his family who made sacrifices to allow him to pursue such lofty dreams.

Nothing would have been possible for Parekh without parents who embraced the sport despite having no background in hockey and grandparents who put everything on the line for a better life.

Zayne's paternal grandfather, Casim, came to Canada from India in the early 1970s, looking to build a life for his family. A year later, he brought his family, including Zayne's father, Azim, to Oshawa, Ont., where they could start their new life. With hockey everywhere around them, and *Hockey Night In Canada* a fixture on the television for almost every family in Canada, Azim and his siblings began to develop their love for the game.

Zayne's maternal grandparents, Choon Yul and Mi Soon Lee, survived the Korean War and eventually immigrated to Germany in 1964, looking for work as South Korea went through postwar economic struggles. The couple then moved to Canada, where they settled in Sault Ste. Marie. Three years later, they had Zayne's mother, Mona, before eventually moving to Toronto.

No story of immigration is the same, but almost all have a similar end goal. Zayne and his two brothers, Aydin and Isa, are the results of two separate journeys across the world with a common goal in mind: making life better for their children and the generations to come.

Parekh's understanding of his family's trials and tribulations has grown as he has. His appreciation for their sacrifices and struggles helps make him the person and player he is today.

The journey that Parekh is on now is nothing like the journey that got him to where he is today. The skill and creativity that he displays on the ice are only possible because of the difficult endeavors his family took to give him the life he has. Now, Parekh is determined to show his gratitude for what they've gone through by working even harder to pursue his dreams of winning at the NHL level and representing his family along the way. "There is that saying," Parekh said, " 'It takes a village to raise a child,' and I have so many people to thank for getting me here." H

CHIPOTLE
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FORGOT ABOUT

PHOTO BY ALLISON KENNEDY DAVIES

TREY?

Nah. You know him. He's still the same original 'G' who's been front and center for Team USA and a revived Michigan State program. But improved rebound control and skating have Trey Augustine one step closer to starring for his hometown NHL squad

BY JARED CLINTON

ADAM NIGHTINGALE WAS hardly off the plane from the Under-18 World Championship in Germany when the call came in. It was May 2022, and Nightingale was driving to East Lansing, Mich. Not even one day earlier, he had helped guide Team USA to silver at the U-18s, and here Nightingale was set to be named coach of his alma mater, returning almost two decades after he played his final game as a Spartan and nine years after leaving his post as Michigan State's director of hockey operations.

On the line was an advisor for Trey Augustine, who had just played his heart out for Nightingale's American outfit, taking the blue paint in the tournament's semifinal and gold-medal games. Augustine's advisor wanted to know how the then-17-year-old keeper had fared at the competition. Nightingale was effusive with his praise – Augustine had been excellent, Nightingale thought, and he said as much. Then came a question that has helped change the Spartans' trajectory: "He said, 'Well, what do you think about him for Michigan State?'" Nightingale recalled. "And I was like, 'No brainer.' "

Less than two full seasons later, it's become obvious to everyone else why Nightingale was so eager to bring Augustine aboard.

As a freshman in 2023-24, Augustine was the youngest starting goaltender in the NCAA, and only 13 goalies appeared in more games than he did. Yet, only seven of those netminders posted a save percentage better than his .915 mark, and none – not among those who saw more action nor anyone else in Div. I – stopped more rubber. Augustine earned Big Ten tournament MVP honors, was a finalist for the Mike Richter Award as the nation's top goaltender and, in the

TREY AUGUSTINE

middle of it all, he managed to jet off to the 2024 World Junior Championship and lead the tournament in SP and goals-against average while backstopping the Americans to gold.

SPARTAN EXISTENCE
Though Michigan State was in a rough patch, Augustine was keen to help build a new culture.

This season, too, he's picked up right where he left off, both at Michigan State and internationally. In January, he took the starting reins for Team USA's WJC team for the third consecutive year, and he was the goaltender of record as they repeated as champions for the first time in tournament history. Meanwhile, back at home, Augustine entered the stretch run of the Spartans' season as the No. 1 goalie for one of the top programs in the country. And he's one of the players who has helped elevate the program to its lofty standing.

When Nightingale was hired and Augustine first committed to Michigan State, the program remained proud but had fallen on hard times. In 2021-22, the three-time national-champion Spartans won just 12 games and lost 15 of their final 16 contests of the season. Nightingale said Augustine being drawn to Michigan State despite the program's recent run of ill results said a lot about the young stopper's character, drive and willingness to embrace challenges.

And that played into it for Augustine, sure, but so did the relationship he had formed with Nightingale at the U-18s and during their time together at USA Hockey's National Team Development Program. “You kind of feel that he wants the best for you,” Augustine said. “When you have a guy as intelligent as that talking to you and understanding you and wants you to help build the culture from the ground up, it's hard to say no to that.”

But how does a goaltender, let alone one of the youngest in the NCAA, help change the culture? Performance can play its part, and in Augustine's case, it undoubtedly has, but there's more to it than the numbers. It's about how the players carry themselves, and Augustine has done so in a way that belies his age. Despite his preternatural puck-stopping gifts, he's a low-maintenance, no-ego player who doesn't want an ounce of special treatment. “He's gotten more confident in being who he is, believing in that, sticking with it, and that's had a trickle-down on our program,” Nightingale said. “That's what we're looking for: guys who are all about the team, and he for sure embodies that.”

AUGUSTINE
1

Though much of that happens off the ice, there is an element that comes with it, and it's something Augustine has possessed even dating back to his minor-hockey days: an ice-in-his-veins demeanor.

A flurry in front of his net? No big deal. A bad turnover that leads to a scoring chance? Augustine won't be shaken. A goal against? He'll brush it off. And the truth

TOP: PHOTO BY MSU ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS; MIDDLE: PHOTO BY ALLISON KENNEDY DAVIES

is that Augustine's unflappability isn't so much innate as it is acquired; it's a quality he's worked to take from his mom. "She played Div. I basketball in college, so I was able to talk with her and learn from some of her high-pressure experiences," he said. "It's always been a goal of mine where, at the end of the day, I can help my team to feel safe and protected out there, so being that calm presence allows them to play to the best of their abilities."

There's a selflessness to Augustine's understanding of how his actions can influence the actions of others that speaks to another of his greatest strengths. Nightingale said there's an intelligence to Augustine's game that stands out, not unlike what you'd find in a savvy two-way pivot or a shutdown defender. Put another way, Augustine's game is perhaps less reactive than it is proactive. "Maybe there's a seam play that happens, and he's a step ahead," Nightingale said. "The best players are always one step ahead, and the best goalies are, and being a smart goalie is one of his gifts."

Augustine knows, though, that a cool head and the ability to read the play in front of him will not alone get him to the next level. Getting the chance to achieve a childhood dream and play for his hometown Red Wings – Detroit drafted Augustine 41st overall in 2023 – will require him to continue to build on the foundation he has in place. It's work that is already being done.

Augustine said his rebound control has improved significantly since he arrived at Michigan State, giving him the tools to snuff out second-chance attempts before they even arise. Nightingale also noted that while Augustine has always been an impressive skater, he lacked confidence in his ability to get out and handle the puck. He's made strides there and understands the influence something so seemingly small can have on his and the Spartans' game. "Playing the puck has a huge impact on the team, being able to break pucks out of your own end and creating less work for yourself," Augustine said. "By improving that, I've helped myself out and the team as well."

Given the thoughtfulness with which Augustine approaches his game, it's all the more evident why he's become so central to Michigan State's rise. It's similarly apparent why the Red Wings are intrigued by the potential, real and untapped, that Augustine possesses. But none of it, be it well-earned accolades or the weight of expectation, seems primed to knock him off course. "It's the game of hockey," Augustine said. "Stuff can change lightning-quick. So, for me, it's every day, keep earning that trust and keep doing what I can to separate myself and prove I belong in the net." H

PROJECTING NHL ARRIVAL DATES

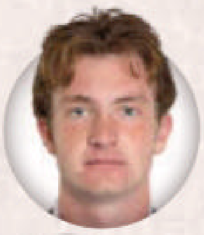
THESE EIGHT YOUNG GOALIES can be found in this year's Future Watch list of the game's top 100 prospects. You'll probably see a couple of them in the NHL next season. The others will need several more years to develop. **BY BRIAN COSTELLO**

37

JESPER WALLSTEDT

22, Minnesota
Drafted 20th overall in 2021

Marc-Andre Fleury's pending retirement opens the door for Wallstedt. He'll likely be broken in slowly next season, somewhere around 20-25 NHL games. He's four years younger than Filip Gustavsson, so it will be several years before the Wild have two big-ticket stoppers.

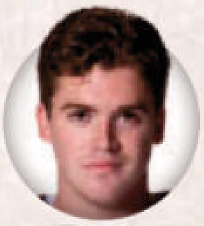


46

TREY AUGUSTINE

20, Detroit
Drafted 41st overall in 2023

Augustine and Sebastian Cossa represent Detroit's future in net. The thinking might be for Augustine to turn pro this spring after a second superb NCAA season, then apprentice a year or two in the AHL. Then he could battle Cossa for NHL playing time in 2027-28.

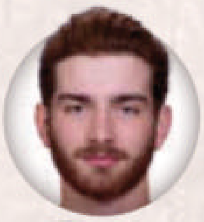


63

JACOB FOWLER

20, Montreal
Drafted 69th overall in 2023

Fowler has done everything he can at the NCAA level and is ready for a bigger test. It's never wrong to stay in school, but a season or two in the AHL is the prudent path. The Habs also have Jakub Dobes in the pipeline, so it will come down to who performs better.

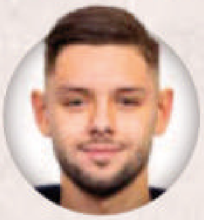


69

SEBASTIAN COSSA

22, Detroit
Drafted 15th overall in 2021

Ville Husso and Alex Lyon are on expiring contracts, while 37-year-old Cam Talbot has one year remaining. It makes sense to hand the backup job to Cossa in 2025-26 and give him lots of runway. If he's worthy, Cossa is the likely starter in 2026-27. If not, Augustine is close.



87

ILYA NABOKOV

21, Colorado
Drafted 38th overall in 2024

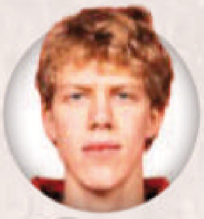
What's less predictable than nailing down a goalie's NHL arrival date? How about a Russian goalie's timeline. 'Nabby' was taken as a 21-year-old after slipping through three drafts. The Avs have 'Wood Squared' signed through next season, so 2026-27 is the earliest arrival date.

90

EGOR ZAVRAGIN

19, Philadelphia
Drafted 87th overall in 2023

Even though Zavragin is playing well in the KHL right now, he's still just 19, and there is no rush to have him fast-tracked to North America. The wild card is how Samuel Ersson, Ivan Fedotov and Aleksei Kolosov come along. The earliest date for Zavragin is 2027-28.

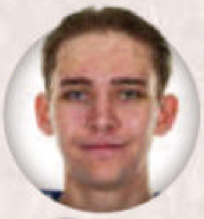


96

MIKHAIL YEGOROV

18, New Jersey
Drafted 49th overall in 2024

Slow and steady is the right approach. Yegorov moved from the USHL to the NCAA mid-season and is sure to spend two more years at Boston University. If the Devils retain Jacob Markstrom beyond 2026, they can transition to Yegorov by 2028-29.



98

MARCUS GIDLOF

19, NY Islanders
Drafted 147th in 2024

He's looking like a gem of a fifth-round pick. Gidlof already has the body type of an NHL goalie, he just needs time to grow into his frame. The Isles were very patient with Ilya Sorokin, letting him apprentice for six seasons post-draft. So it might be 2029 or 2030 for Gidlof.

BERKLY CATTON

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WINNING PERSPECTIVE

After Canada's disappointing performance at the World Junior Championship, **Berkly Catton** found refuge skating on an outdoor rink in his hometown. The 'reset' helped the Kraken's top prospect return to the WHL on a scoring rampage as he rounds out his game for the NHL

BY KEN CAMPBELL

LEFT: LARRY BRUNT/SPOKANE CHIEFS; RIGHT: PHOTO BY ALLISON KENNEDY DAVIES

THE WORLD JUNIOR Championship was "a real kick in the nuts" for Chris Catton's son. We know this, well, because we watched it and that's exactly how he described it. So after the debacle came to an end, Chris Catton's kid went home to Saskatoon for a few days and immediately headed to the place where he has always found refuge. After the tournament, one of the first places Berkly Catton went was the Dr. John G. Egnatoff School Rink on Kenderdine Road, where he could be alone with his stick and puck and watch his breath fade into the prairie sky. "It was therapeutic," Berkly Catton said. "Instead of 20,000 people screaming, it was not a sound, except for the puck hitting the boards. It felt like it reset me."

It was the same place Berkly went almost three years ago after the Saskatoon Contacts under-18 team was eliminated in three straight games in the playoffs by the Saskatoon Blazers, who were led by Roger McQueen, a top-five candidate for the 2025 NHL draft. Chris got worried when his son didn't come home after the game. In the wee hours of the morning, he decided to check the only place he thought his son would be. "Sure enough, he was out there at 1:30 in the morning in the dark," Chris said. "As he's gotten older, he's gotten a little better, but he's always been a kid who has had a hard time letting go when things didn't go his way."

That borderline unhealthy obsession has served Catton well on his way to becoming the Seattle Kraken's top prospect. Chris said his son would stickhandle with a ball and mini-sticks for hours on end in the family's kitchen from the time he was four. Berkly

BERKLY CATTON

credits the 36-by-24-foot backyard rink that Chris built as a big contributor to his abilities to stickhandle and create offense in tight quarters. That rink has since been replaced by a shooting area in the backyard where Catton and Chicago Blackhawks prospect Kevin Korchinski spend hours in the summer perfecting their shots. “We’d go out in the backyard, and he’d specifically ask me to pass pucks into his feet,” said Chris, a Grade 7 science and math teacher. “He always wanted me to give him bad passes, and I’d ask why, and he’d say, ‘Because those are the passes you have to learn to take. The good ones are easy.’ ”

> **INSTEAD OF 20,000 PEOPLE SCREAMING, IT WAS NOT A SOUND, EXCEPT FOR THE PUCK HITTING THE BOARDS. IT FELT LIKE IT RESET ME** – BERKLY CATTON

But his persistence has also caused him a few problems over the years. At the NHL draft last summer, Catton had a series of photos embossed on the inside of his suit jacket that saluted the people who helped him get to that day, along with hockey photos from his childhood. On the bottom left is a photo of a very young Catton with cheeks that are dangerously red. Turns out there was a day when the temperature dipped to about minus-34 – Celsius, Fahrenheit, they’re almost the same when it’s that cold out – and he refused to come off the ice into the house. It ended up that Catton had a serious case of frostbite, an affliction of which he’s reminded pretty much every time he feels the cold weather on his face these days. That wasn’t as bad as the time when he was 14 and an extended outdoor stint at the Egnatoff Rink led to a trip to the emergency room after his foot got so cold that his big toe turned purple. Coincidentally, he was out there with Caden Price, his boyhood friend who the Kraken drafted 84th overall in 2023. “They almost had to chop my toe off,” Catton said. “Thank God it never came to that. It’s not smart, but those are some of my fondest memories. When I look back at it, I don’t remember the cold toes. All I remember was how much fun I had.”

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crave

GOAL DRIVEN
Catton’s production stalled at the WJC, but the Kraken’s top prospect has been piling up points in the WHL.

It’s a good thing Catton has retained all his foot digits, since all 10 of them help make up two feet that need to move quickly. Among Catton’s best attributes is his edge work, which allows him to make plays at top speed. He is definitely not a huge player, especially for a center, but he’s the same height and only 10 pounds lighter than Connor Bedard. Catton idolized Sidney Crosby as a youngster, but he has since come to appreciate another dangerous, undersized center who can take over a game. “A guy like Jack Hughes is so elite, and he’s so fun to watch,” Catton said. “There are a lot of times I’ll watch his game on a Friday night and come Saturday, I’m trying to do some of that stuff myself. Just how fast he is through the middle of the ice and how much he demands the puck, I think are some similarities to my game.”

We know he can create offense. After leading Canada in scoring at the 2023 U-18 Hlinka Gretzky Cup, Catton posted 116 points and 1.71 points per game for the WHL’s Spokane Chiefs, which led all draft-eligible players last season.

TOP: JOE CAMPOREALE-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: PHOTO BY ALLISON KENNEDY DAVIES

His 1.87 points per game is third-best in the WHL this season, and, as disappointing as his experience was at the world juniors, Catton returned to the WHL – after his brief stay in Saskatoon – like a man possessed. In his first 10 games after the WJC, Catton posted 24 points, including a one-goal, six-assist effort in his second game back. In one game in mid-January, he registered 10 shots on goal, then followed up with nine more shots two nights later.

There are scouts who doubt whether he'll be as prolific in the NHL, and the fact is there are a rare few who can put up those kinds of numbers in the best league in the world. But Catton is projected as a productive top-six forward, which is encouraging to the Kraken, who have built up an impressive stockpile of young and talented forwards. Catton's 200-foot game is improving and will serve him well at the next level. And if he finds he can't produce in the NHL the way he has at lower levels, he is versatile enough to still be an effective player. The thing about Catton is he makes up for average top speed with incredible edge work, and even though his tools are not elite, his hockey sense is.

TOP+BOTTOM: LARRY BRUNT/SPOKANE CHIEFS; RIGHT: PHOTO BY ALLISON KENNEDY DAVIES

> **“THEY ALMOST HAD TO CHOP MY TOE OFF. ALL I REMEMBER WAS HOW MUCH FUN I HAD**
>
> **– BERKLY CATTON**

Catton had just one assist in five games at the world juniors, but he has managed to find the positives in the experience and knows he'll have the opportunity to be an impactful offensive player next year on a team that should be much better. “There was a lot to learn from it,” Catton said. “If you asked all of the guys on that team, we're probably stronger people and better hockey players from it, even though it wasn't what we wanted. Now we know how awful it feels to lose out of the tournament that early, and that experience alone will drive us to a way better position.”

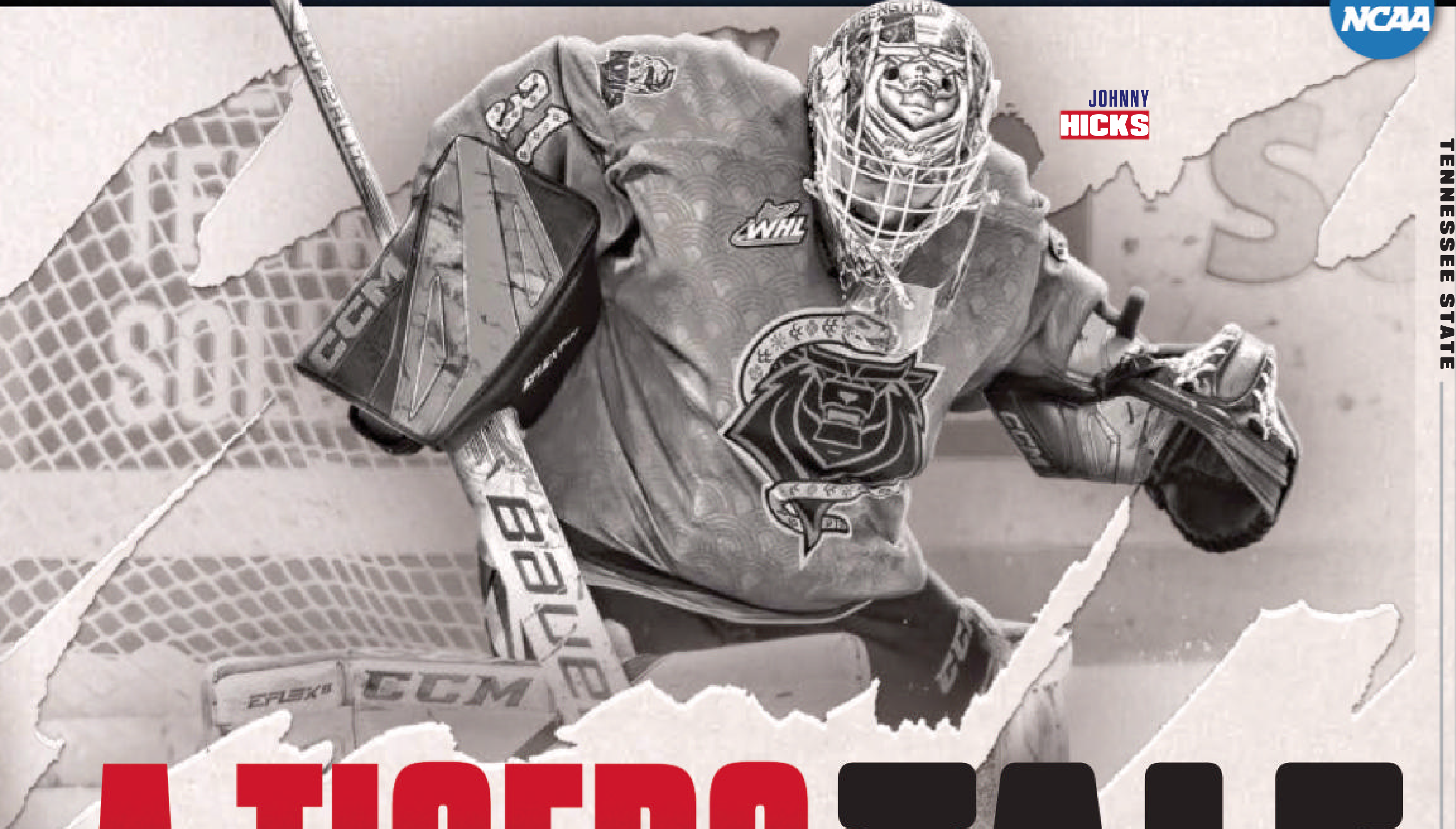
Catton is hoping that if he gets a chance to go back to the Dr. John G. Egnatoff School Rink on Kenderdine Road in Saskatoon after the world juniors next year, he'll be in a much better frame of mind, preferably with a gold medal in his collection. And he'll be sure to guard against frostbite.

TENNESSEE STATE

EMERSON
MILLER

DUANTE'
ABERCROMBIE

MILLER: BREE SMITH; ABERCROMBIE: TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY



A TIGERS TALE

As Tennessee State prepares to launch its hockey program – directly into Div. I, no less – they're on the hunt for players who can deal with the adversity the team is set to face

BY RYAN KENNEDY

THERE'S NO POINT ASKING Duante' Abercrombie what he's doing nowadays. You'll save time by just asking what he *isn't* doing.

The first hockey coach at Tennessee State, Abercrombie is constantly watching video, travelling, scheduling games, fundraising and recruiting for a Tigers program that plans to hit the ice next season with a top-tier team. That's right, there has never even been club hockey at TSU – but they're going straight to Div. I.

If that sounds daunting, add to that the fact the school itself is currently going through financial problems, so the hockey team has to be privately funded by donations for at least its first season.

So, as their coach was putting together the first TSU roster, he wasn't just looking at player statistics. "If you haven't gone through some type of adversity, I'm not sure you'll be able to handle what we're going to be going through in the first couple of years," Abercrombie said. "The bus rides, the back and forth to different rinks for practice and games, the possible media attention, a lot will come with being a TSU Tiger."

There will be pride in wearing that jersey, however: Tennessee State is the first HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) to have a hockey team, and Abercrombie is the first Black head coach in Div. I men's hockey history. "I had known what an HBCU was and some of their values, but during the recruiting process, I've learned more about what they represent," said defenseman Emerson Miller. "They all have a deep history of academics and sports, plus all their traditions and cultures are different from most schools. There's a really strong sense of community, and that's another thing I'm excited to be a part of. Growing up, I didn't play with that many players of color on the same team, and now, there are quite a few of us going there."

And while Tennessee State is an HBCU, the team will be multiracial. "Some think this team needs to be all Black," Abercrombie said. "No, this team just needs to represent what HBCUs were founded on, which is giving opportunities to individuals that weren't able to have them and a sense of family. Some of our commits have faced a ton of adversity, and people don't know their stories."

Miller was one of those commits Abercrombie is citing. Originally from the To-

HICKS: GORD RUFH

JOHNNY
HICKS

ronto area, Miller played in the GTHL, but he wasn't a buzzed-about recruit (Windsor selected him in the seventh round of the OHL draft). With an eye on the NCAA, he headed down to the NAHL, first with Corpus Christi in Texas and now with the Massachusetts-based Northeast Generals. "Just starting off, I didn't get as much opportunity when I was younger, and I thought I was done," Miller said. "I've been with Northeast for three years seeing guys commit (to NCAA programs), come in, come out, and as the clock ran out into my last year, it was a question of, 'What am I playing for?' I always had the goal that this was what I wanted to do, so I was very fortunate with coach Abercrombie and Northeast's coaching staff that they were able to help me with this achievement. I kept my head down and kept working, and I'm just excited to play with more kids like me, kids of color."

> **THIS TEAM JUST NEEDS TO REPRESENT WHAT HBCUs WERE FOUNDED ON**
>
> **– DUANTE' ABERCROMBIE**

Several TSU recruits are from the NAHL, and Miller has been keeping in touch with a couple of them in his division, such as Odin Ford and Ethan Wongus. But there is also a good helping of kids from out West committed to the Tigers, such as goalie Johnny Hicks – another player Abercrombie believes has gone through the adversity needed for his team. Hicks, who is white, has spent most of his junior career in the BCHL as a smaller netminder, but the NCAA's new eligibility rules have allowed him to play for the WHL's Victoria Royals recently. "I wasn't hearing from many colleges, and Tennessee was the first," Hicks said. "Their coach reached out, and I was really excited that he did. It's pretty cool to play in Nashville. I've only heard good things from everyone I've talked to, that it's a pretty cool city."

Ah, yes. Did we mention that TSU is located in Nashville? On top of all the history-making the Tigers will be doing next season, they will also be bringing Div. I hockey to one of the most popular cities in America. "Being less than a 10-minute drive from campus to the middle of Broadway, that's great for their families when they visit," Abercrombie said. "The restaurants. The music. There's so much to do in Nashville. There aren't many D-I programs that can offer that. There are very few cities like Nashville in the first place."

OPENING FACEOFF

When the Tigers hit the ice next season, Tennessee State will become home to the first HBCU hockey program.

So the pitch is straightforward. But how will the team play? "Pace, pace, pace," Abercrombie said. "I don't want to get stuck on the walls, and we have to make sure we operate in the middle of the ice. I've had people wonder about commits who don't put up points and aren't flashy, but for me, they always find their way to the middle of the ice, and they're always on the right side of the play. That's a player I can work with."

While the Tigers' schedule hasn't been released yet, Abercrombie counted off opponents from almost every major conference, so his troops will be thrown into the fire. But they're ready for the challenge. "We're going to be a hardworking team, and we'll give teams a run for their money," Hicks said. "I want to prove people wrong, and I think that's Duante''s vision as well."

EMERSON
MILLER

HICKS: STEVE DUNSMOOR; MILLER: BREE SMITH; TSU CAMPUS, DRAFT DAY: RYAN KENNEDY

TENNESSEE
STATE

TSU SHOP: RYAN KENNEDY

Abercrombie has been an associate coach at the Div. III level and also spent a year in the NHL as a development coach with the Toronto Maple Leafs. He plans on hiring his assistants once the usual NCAA hockey transfer window opens up around April, but in the meantime, he's running a tight ship consisting of himself and Nick Guerriero, who has been doing a lot of the administration for the team while also maintaining his post in TSU's communications department.

TSU could have iced a club hockey team this season to ease the transition, but no scholarships are available for club sports, and Abercrombie didn't want to limit the type of player he could bring in. So next year's inaugural squad will have at least 18 freshmen, plus however many players come through the transfer portal or get added from CHL teams.

The travel for Abercrombie has been impressive. "I've been as far north and east as Toronto, but I'm heading up to Boston shortly," he said. "Now that major junior is available, I want to get out to some QMJHL games. I've been all the way over to Idaho Falls. I've been to the BCHL showcase, and I'm going back to B.C. soon. I go back and forth to Maryland, where my house is, to save money, so I watch a lot of NAHL, and I went to the USHL Fall Classic (in Pittsburgh)."

As for scheduling, he literally called every coach in the nation while also locking down six or seven dates at the annual coaches' conference in Naples, Fla. "Hockey is a small fraternity," Abercrombie said. "I wanted to introduce myself to all the coaches, and some of them actually mentioned they might have openings. I was going team by team, conference by conference, making those calls. Almost every game that we have on our schedule came out of those bulk calls."

It's a ton of work, and there is budgeting and fundraising to take care of, but with a growing roster and the excitement that comes with a new program, there will be attention on the Tigers when they hit the ice. Once they do, all they need to do is roar. H

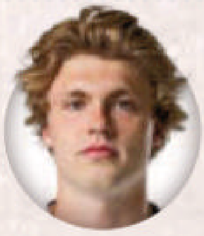
2025 NCAA FREE AGENTS

FOR YEARS NOW, WE'VE seen lackluster returns from NCAA free agents. This isn't to say you can't find talent in college hockey – far from it – but most of that talent has already been drafted by NHL teams. And while NHL teams are still looking for late-bloomers and potential gems in free agency, they're being more realistic. The ideal candidate is a bottom-six forward who can kill penalties, a surly power forward or a third-pairing defenseman with size. This year is light on goaltender speculation, but you know netminders: there's always a surprising one who was overlooked. Here are eight NCAA free agents who could sign pro deals once their seasons are finished. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

GLEB
VEREMYEV

LW, 21, Colorado College (NCHC)

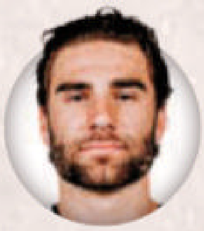
Veremyev put up great numbers as a sophomore, and while he hasn't produced at the same level as a junior this season, he's better known for his nasty streak. He's a big winger who likes to throw his weight around, and his intimidating reputation goes back to his USHL days, where he was in the top 10 in penalty minutes two years running.



KARSEN
DORWART

C, 22, Michigan State (Big Ten)

Dorwart is a two-way center on a Spartans team that is one of the best in the country. His skating and pace are seen as drawbacks, but he's got a great 200-foot game and plays in all situations. He gets consistently good results in the faceoff circle as well, so he could wind up as a complementary bottom-six pivot at the NHL level.



HARRISON
SCOTT

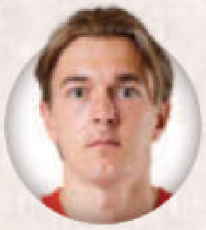
LW, 24, Maine (HE)

With Bradly Nadeau leaving for the pros after one season, the Black Bears needed someone to pick up the slack on offense, and Scott has delivered as their leading producer. Overall, he's an energy guy who can score, and he's been a little better than a point-per-game player this year. Scott spent his first two seasons with Bentley University.

CALEB
MACDONALD

D, 22, North Dakota (NCHC)

MacDonald is a 6-foot-3, 224-pound defenseman who blocks shots and plays a tough game. It's not a strong year for free-agent blueliners, which means he has been in demand. Coming out of the Alberta Jr. A League, he wasn't afraid to fight, and though there are no fisticuffs in college hockey, it's good to know he has that in his back pocket.



DALTON
BANCROFT

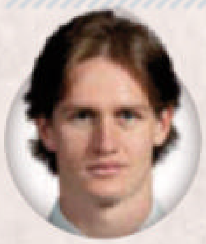
RW, 24, Cornell (ECAC)

The power forward has seen his numbers drop as a junior on a middling Big Red squad, but Bancroft is the type of crash-and-banger whose game would translate nicely to the NHL. His father, Steve Bancroft, had a cup of coffee in the NHL during a long career as a minor-league journeyman defenseman who was known for his snarl.

JOSH
EERNISSE

RW, 23, Michigan (Big Ten)

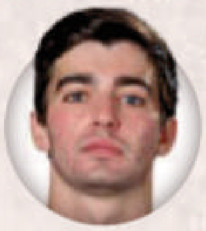
Eernisse is big, strong and mobile. When NHL teams look at college free agents, they're typically conservative in their expectations. Getting a fourth-liner who can kill penalties at the NHL level is considered a win. Eernisse, who started his college career at St. Thomas before becoming a Wolverine last season, fits the mold.



JACK
WILLIAMS

C, 22, Northeastern (HE)

Williams, a top-20 scorer in the NCAA, is a little undersized, but he shows a great compete level and is the type of determined player who could find his way to a pro job. Coaches love him, and he's been a scoring threat in all situations for the Huskies. He really found his range as a sophomore and has been even better as a junior.



LIAM
MCLINSKEY

RW, 24, Holy Cross (AHA)

McLinskey is wiry at 6-foot-3 and 185 pounds, but he has the skills to make him a top-15 scorer in the nation. He's always around the net, and he can make plays, too. His first offensive explosion came last season as a junior, when he had 47 points in 39 games, and there's a chance he helps the Crusaders get into the national tournament for more exposure.

NHL TEAM REPORTS

WHAT'S INSIDE

PROSPECT DEVELOPMENT has different paths and timelines. Whether they're drafted out of junior, college or Europe, prospects usually filter through the AHL on their way to the NHL. In the upcoming pages, we look at each team's top 10 prospects based on long-term upside.

REPORT CARD GRADE & NHL RANK

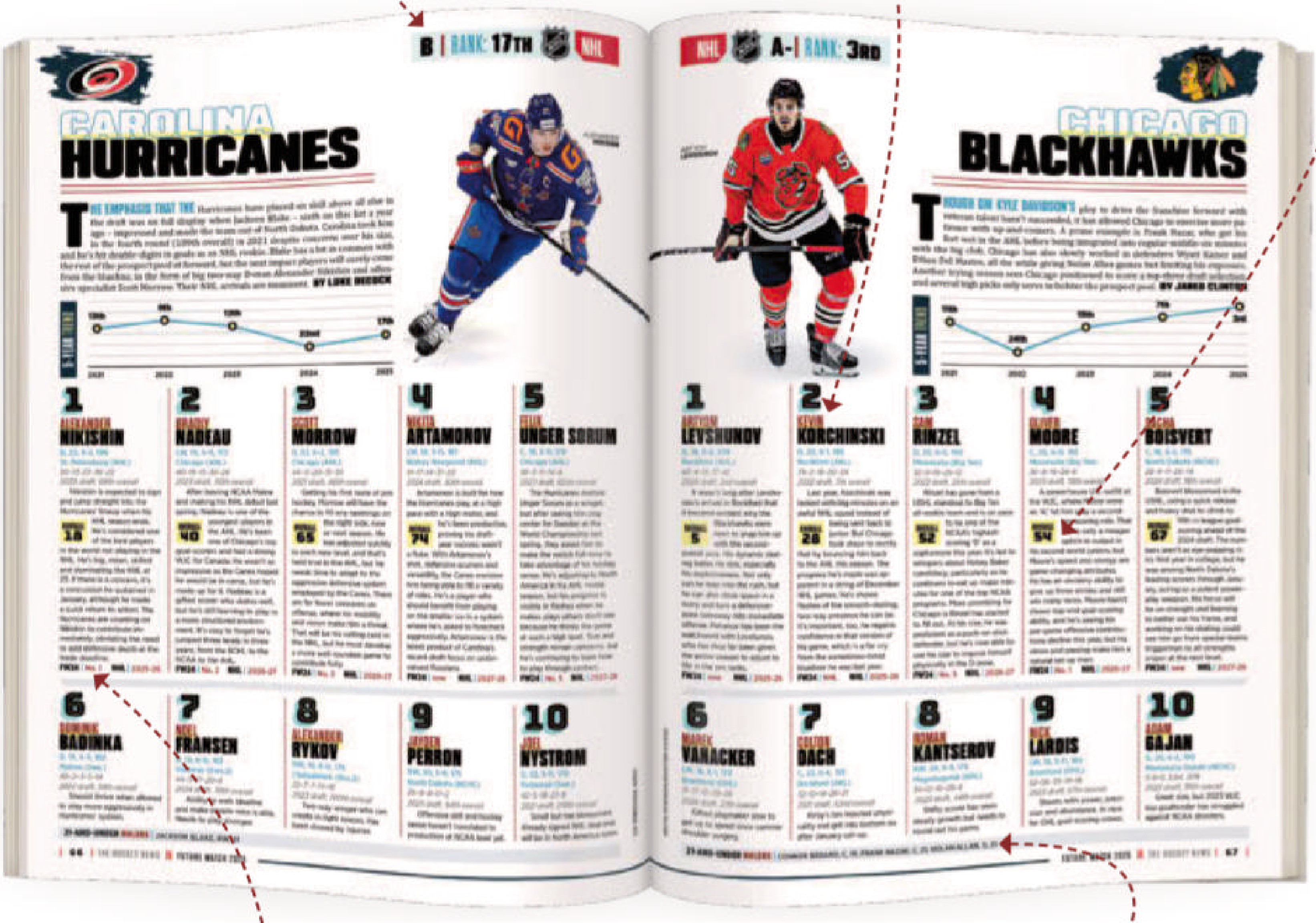
A panel of scouts grades each team's list of top-10 prospects and 21-and-under NHLers. Grades range from A to D+. Rankings are 1 to 32.

TOP 10 PROSPECTS

Most NHL teams have 35 or more affiliated prospects in their systems. These 10 have the best long-term upside – five to 10 years out.

TOP 100 NHL PROSPECTS

A panel of scouts votes on the top 60 NHL-affiliated prospects from a list of 320. The top 100 vote-getters are identified here.


B | RANK: 17TH
CAROLINA HURRICANES
A- | RANK: 3RD
CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS
1 ALEXANDER NIKISHIN
2 BRADLY NADEAU
3 SCOTT MORROW
4 NIKITA ARTAMONOV
5 FELIX UNGER SORUM
6 DOMINIK BADINKA
7 NOEL FRANSEN
8 ALEXANDER RYKOV
9 JAYDEN PERRON
10 JOEL NYSTROM
1 ARTYOM LEVSHUNOV
2 KEVIN KORCHINSKI
3 SAM RINZEL
4 OLIVER MOORE
5 SACHA BOISVERT
6 MAREK VANACKER
7 COLTON DACH
8 ROMAN KANTSEROV
9 NICK LARDIS
10 ADAM GAJAN

PAST AND FUTURE

Where the prospect ranked on his team in 2024, and when we expect him to make an NHL impact.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS

Under-22 NHLers are part of the organizational grade because teams shouldn't be penalized for young talent reaching the NHL. Ages as of Feb. 28.

GRADES AND PERSPECTIVE

It is not all about a team's Future Watch report-card grade. It's how it measures up against the rest of the league **BY BRIAN COSTELLO**

TEAMS IN THE MIDST of their Stanley Cup windows don't typically have high grades in our annual Future Watch issue. That's because to remain among the top Cup contenders every year, they often have to forsake high picks and prospects. They don't complain about it. In fact, they strive toward it.

The chart on the right is an attempt to level the playing surface when it comes to analyzing how NHL teams perform at the draft. Teams with high Future Watch report-card grades (below) have both quality and quantity in their prospect systems. But they should. They're at the low end of the NHL standings and have had multiple early picks in recent drafts. The 'ADR' number ranks NHL teams on how early they've made their first pick in the past four drafts. Anaheim, Columbus and Utah have had the earliest first picks since 2021. So it's no surprise they have the second-, sixth- and fifth-highest report-card grades, respectively.

At the other end of the spectrum, Colorado, Tampa Bay and Florida have had the latest first picks since 2021. So it stands to reason those teams have lower Future Watch report-card grades – 30th, 25th and 32nd, respectively.

JACKSON BLAKE

Our handicapping system shows the difference between where a team ranks in its average draft rank since 2021 and the strength of its prospect system. Carolina and Washington are at the top. The Canes have an ADR of 26th, yet their report-card grade ranks 17th, for a difference of plus-9. The Caps have also done well in drafting and developing compared to the field in where they've selected in the draft.

Over half of the league's teams, as you would probably expect, fall within four spots, plus or minus, of zero.

HANDICAPPING SYSTEM

This chart orders NHL teams on their recent draft performances in comparison to other clubs. 'ADR' is the average draft rank of the team's first pick since 2021. 'RK' is a ranking of the team's 2025 report-card grade.

TEAM	ADR	RK.	+/-
1. Carolina	26	17	+9
2. Washington	17	9	+8
3. Vancouver	25	19	+6
– Tampa Bay	31	25	+6
– San Jose	7	1	+6
– Ottawa	28	22	+6
7. Montreal	9	4	+5
– Chicago	8	3	+5
9. Dallas	19	15	+4
– NY Islanders	27	23	+4
– Minnesota	12	8	+4
12. Colorado	32	30	+2
13. Boston	29	28	+1
– New Jersey	14	13	+1
15. NY Rangers	20	20	0
16. Nashville	13	14	–1
– Detroit	6	7	–1
– Anaheim	1	2	–1
19. Calgary	16	18	–2
– Toronto	24	26	–2
– Utah	3	5	–2
– Florida	30	32	–2
– St. Louis	10	12	–2
24. Pittsburgh	21	24	–3
25. Columbus	2	6	–4
26. Philadelphia	11	16	–5
27. Seattle	4	10	–6
– Winnipeg	15	21	–6
– Buffalo	5	11	–6
30. Los Angeles	22	29	–7
31. Edmonton	23	31	–8
32. Vegas	18	27	–9

RK.	TEAM (2024 RK.)	'24	'25
1.	**SAN JOSE** (13TH) *21-and-under NHLers: Macklin Celebrini, Will Smith*	B	**A**
2.	**ANAHEIM** (1ST) *L. Carlsson, P. Mintyukov, O. Zellweger, C. Gauthier*	A	**A**
3.	**CHICAGO** (7TH) *Connor Bedard, Frank Nazar, Nolan Allan*	B+	**A–**
4.	**MONTREAL** (17TH) *Lane Hutson, Juraj Slafkovsky*	B–	**A–**
5.	**UTAH** (2ND) *Logan Cooley, Dylan Guenther*	A–	**A–**
6.	**COLUMBUS** (3RD) *Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger*	A–	**B+**
7.	**DETROIT** (6TH) *Marco Kasper*	B+	**B+**
8.	**MINNESOTA** (11TH)	B	**B+**
9.	**WASHINGTON** (19TH)	B–	**B+**
10.	**SEATTLE** (14TH) *Shane Wright*	B	**B+**
11.	**BUFFALO** (5TH) *Zach Benson, Jiri Kulich*	B+	**B+**
12.	**ST. LOUIS** (4TH)	B+	**B+**
13.	**NEW JERSEY** (8TH) *Luke Hughes*	B+	**B**
14.	**NASHVILLE** (9TH) *Zach L'Heureux*	B	**B**
15.	**DALLAS** (12TH) *Wyatt Johnston*	B	**B**
16.	**PHILADELPHIA** (10TH) *Matvei Michkov*	B	**B**
17.	**CAROLINA** (22ND) *Jackson Blake*	C+	**B**
18.	**CALGARY** (20TH)	C+	**B–**
19.	**VANCOUVER** (21ST)	C+	**B–**
20.	**NY RANGERS** (24TH)	C+	**B–**
21.	**WINNIPEG** (16TH)	B–	**C+**
22.	**OTTAWA** (15TH) *Zack Ostapchuk*	B	**C+**
23.	**NY ISLANDERS** (31ST) *Isaiah George*	D+	**C+**
24.	**PITTSBURGH** (27TH) *Owen Pickering*	C–	**C+**
25.	**TAMPA BAY** (29TH) *Conor Geekie*	C–	**C+**
26.	**TORONTO** (23RD)	C+	**C**
27.	**VEGAS** (26TH)	C	**C**
28.	**BOSTON** (25TH) *Matthew Poitras*	C	**C**
29.	**LOS ANGELES** (18TH)	B–	**C**
30.	**COLORADO** (28TH)	C–	**C**
31.	**EDMONTON** (32ND)	D+	**C–**
32.	**FLORIDA** (30TH)	D+	**D+**

PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

2025 TOP 100 PROSPECTS

SAM DICKINSON

It's not easy making the NHL. Nor should it be. Some make it as teenagers, but the majority of prospects filter through the pages of Future Watch year after year

BY BRIAN COSTELLO

THE TURNOVER RATE AMONG names in the top 100 prospects in Future Watch is usually pretty impressive. While some prospects take three, four or even five years to break through to the NHL, the future stars near the top of the list are usually gone a year later.

Each of the top six prospects from Future Watch 2024 is contributing in the NHL right now, led by Philadelphia's Matvei Michkov, who was No. 1. He was followed, in order, by Cutter Gauthier, Will Smith, Simon Edvinsson, Brandt Clarke and Jiri Kulich.

We asked a scout, director of player personnel or GM from each NHL team to provide their input on the top prospects in the game, using a five-to-10-year measuring stick. So, while it's not surprising that the sure-fire prospects at the top of the list get there quicker, a lower-ranked prospect gets every bit equal opportunity. Jakob Pelletier, Seamus Casey and Alex Turcotte were all ranked in the 90s last year yet have made NHL contributions this season.

We start this project in mid-January after NHL teams have had post-WJC scouting meetings. At that point, we draw a line in the sand about who's a prospect and who's an NHLer. In some cases, those scenarios change. That's why names such as Denton Mateychuk, Lian Bichsel, Liam Ohgren, Fedor Svechkov, Emil Andrae and Josh Doan are listed as prospects even though they've broken through as NHLers in the past month or two.

Other players, such as Isaiah George and Owen Pickering, looked to be established NHLers before surprisingly being demoted mid-project. That's why they're not listed among the top 100 prospects.

Each player's rank from last year is in parentheses, with unranked players from last year denoted as "NR." Prospects drafted in 2024 are denoted as "NEW." H

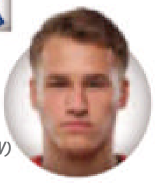
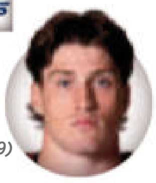
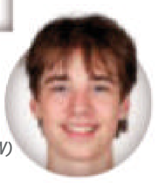
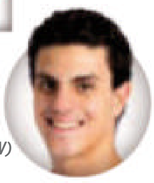
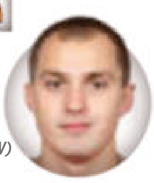
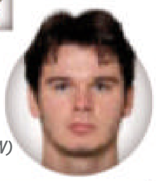
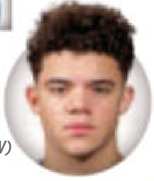
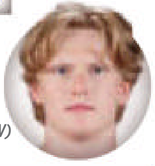
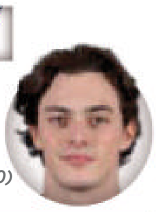
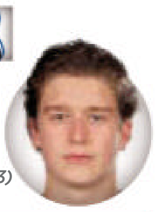
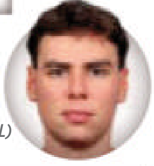
Pos.	Team	Rank	Last year	Club	Player	
RW	MONTREAL	1	(NEW)	St. Petersburg (KHL)	IVAN DEMIDOV	
RW	WASHINGTON	2	(9)	Boston College (HE)	RYAN LEONARD	
RW	ANAHEIM	3	(NEW)	Oshawa (OHL)	BECKETT SENNECKE	
D	MINNESOTA	4	(NEW)	Denver (NCHC)	ZEEV BUIUM	
D	CHICAGO	5	(NEW)	Rockford (AHL)	ARTYOM LEVSHUNOV	
D	CALGARY	6	(NEW)	Saginaw (OHL)	ZAYNE PAREKH	
D	SAN JOSE	7	(NEW)	London (OHL)	SAM DICKINSON	
RW	ST. LOUIS	8	(7)	Minnesota (Big Ten)	JIMMY SNUGGERUD	
D	DETROIT	9	(15)	Skelleftea (Swe.)	AXEL SANDIN-PELLIKKA	
C	UTAH	10	(NEW)	Kelowna (WHL)	TIJ IGINLA	

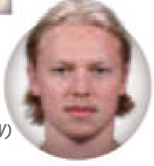
PHOTO BY LONDON KNIGHTS

D
OTTAWA
11 *(NEW)*

Calgary (WHL)
CARTER YAKEMCHUK

C
ST. LOUIS
12 *(10)*

Springfield (AHL)
DALIBOR DVORSKY

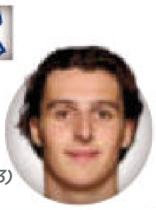
C
COLORADO
13 *(53)*

Oshawa (OHL)
CALUM RITCHIE

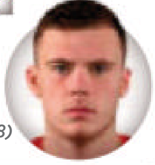
D
NEW JERSEY
14 *(NHL)*

Utica (AHL)
SIMON NEMEC

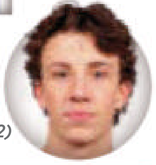
C
BUFFALO
15 *(NEW)*

Rochester (AHL)
KONSTA HELENIUS

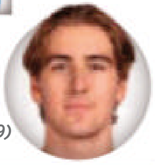
C
PHILADELPHIA
16 *(NEW)*

Guelph (OHL)
JETT LUCHANKO

D
MONTREAL
17 *(13)*

Laval (AHL)
DAVID REINBACHER

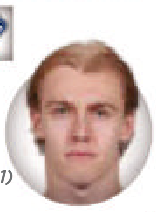
D
CAROLINA
18 *(28)*

St. Petersburg (KHL)
ALEXANDER NIKISHIN

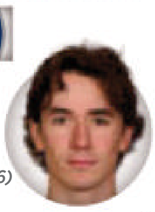
RW
NY RANGERS
19 *(12)*

Boston College (HE)
GABE PERREAULT

D
UTAH
20 *(19)*

Yaroslavl (KHL)
DMITRIY SIMASHEV

D
DALLAS
21 *(51)*

Texas (AHL)
LIAN BICHSEL

RW
VANCOUVER
22 *(11)*

Abbotsford (AHL)
JONATHAN LEKKERIMAKI

C
WINNIPEG
23 *(26)*

Lethbridge (WHL)
BRAYDEN YAGER

D
NEW JERSEY
24 *(NEW)*

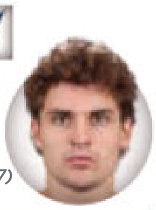
Nizhny Novgorod (KHL)
ANTON SILAYEV

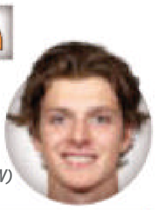
D
MINNESOTA
25 *(NHL)*

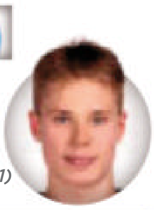
Iowa (AHL)
DAVID JIRICEK

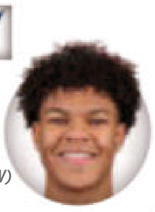
C
SEATTLE
26 *(NEW)*

Spokane (WHL)
BERKLY CATTON

D
COLUMBUS
27 *(37)*

Cleveland (AHL)
DENTON MATEYCHUK

D
CHICAGO
28 *(NEW)*

Rockford (AHL)
KEVIN KORCHINSKI

LW
UTAH
29 *(31)*

Yaroslavl (KHL)
DANIIL BUT

C
COLUMBUS
30 *(NEW)*

Medicine Hat (WHL)
CAYDEN LINDSTROM

C
DETROIT
31 *(20)*

Grand Rapids (AHL)
NATE DANIELSON

D
VANCOUVER
32 *(56)*

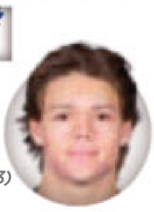
Boston University (HE)
TOM WILLANDER

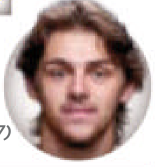
LW
VEGAS
33 *(NEW)*

Providence (HE)
TREVOR CONNELLY

D
PHILADELPHIA
34 *(44)*

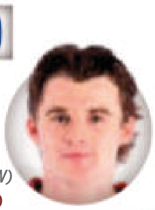
London (OHL)
OLIVER BONK

RW
TORONTO
35 *(43)*

London (OHL)
EASTON COWAN

D
NASHVILLE
36 *(67)*

Medicine Hat (WHL)
TANNER MOLENDYK

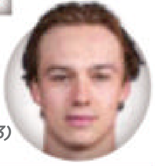
G
MINNESOTA
37 *(16)*

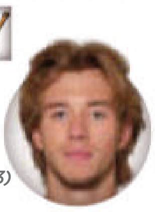
Iowa (AHL)
JESPER WALLSTEDT

LW
NY ISLANDERS
38 *(NEW)*

Boston University (HE)
COLE EISERMAN

D
ST. LOUIS
39 *(NEW)*

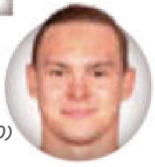
Brantford (OHL)
ADAM JIRICEK

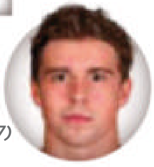
LW
CAROLINA
40 *(33)*

Chicago (AHL)
BRADLY NADEAU

LW
SAN JOSE
41 *(73)*

Sudbury (OHL)
QUENTIN MUSTY

C
MONTREAL
42 *(NEW)*

Michigan (Big Ten)
MICHAEL HAGE

LW
WASHINGTON
43 *(40)*

Hershey (AHL)
IVAN MIROSHNICHENKO

D
ANAHEIM
44 *(27)*

San Diego (AHL)
TRISTAN LUNEAU

LW
NY RANGERS
45 *(29)*

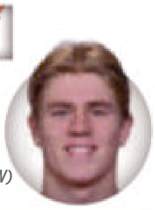
Hartford (AHL)
BRENNAN OTHMANN

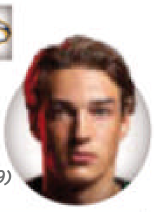
G
DETROIT
46 *(46)*

Michigan State (Big Ten)
TREY AUGUSTINE

RW
LOS ANGELES
47 *(NEW)*

Windsor (OHL)
LIAM GREENTREE

RW
DETROIT
48 *(NEW)*

Skelleftea (Swe.)
MICHAEL BRANDSEGG-NYGARD

C
NASHVILLE
49 *(69)*

Frolunda (Swe.)
DAVID EDSTROM

RW
MINNESOTA
50 *(42)*

Magnitogorsk (KHL)
DANILA YUROV

51	**FEDOR SVECHKOV**	C, Milwaukee (AHL)
52	**SAM RINZEL**	D, Minnesota (Big Ten)
53	**SAMUEL HONZEK**	LW, Calgary (AHL)
54	**OLIVER MOORE**	C, Minnesota (Big Ten)
55	**FABIAN LYSELL**	RW, Providence (AHL)
56	**MAVERIC LAMOUREUX**	D, Tucson (AHL)
57	**JOAKIM KEMELL**	RW, Milwaukee (AHL)
58	**LOGAN MAILLOUX**	D, Laval (AHL)
59	**LIAM OHGREN**	LW, Iowa (AHL)
60	**NOAH OSTLUND**	C, Rochester (AHL)
61	**MATT SAVOIE**	C, Bakersfield (AHL)
62	**COLE HUTSON**	D, Boston University (HE)
63	**JACOB FOWLER**	G, Boston College (HE)
64	**DANNY NELSON**	C, Notre Dame (Big Ten)
65	**SCOTT MORROW**	D, Chicago (AHL)
66	**FRASER MINTEN**	C, Toronto (AHL)
67	**SACHA BOISVERT**	C, North Dakota (NCHC)
68	**SHAKIR MUKHAMADULLIN**	D, San Jose (AHL)
69	**SEBASTIAN COSSA**	G, Grand Rapids (AHL)
70	**OTTO STENBERG**	C, Springfield (AHL)
71	**HARRISON BRUNICKE**	D, Kamloops (WHL)
72	**IGOR CHERNYSHOV**	LW, Saginaw (OHL)
73	**ISAAC HOWARD**	LW, Michigan State (Big Ten)
74	**NIKITA ARTAMONOV**	LW, Nizhny Novgorod (KHL)
75	**DEAN LETOURNEAU**	C, Boston College (HE)
76	**RUTGER MCGROARTY**	RW, W-B/Scranton (AHL)
77	**BRENDAN BRISSON**	C, Henderson (AHL)
78	**BRAD LAMBERT**	C, Manitoba (AHL)
79	**EMIL HEMMING**	RW, Barrie (OHL)
80	**NIKITA CHIBRIKOV**	RW, Manitoba (AHL)
81	**COLBY BARLOW**	LW, Oshawa (OHL)
82	**MIKHAIL GULYAYEV**	D, Omsk (KHL)
83	**LINUS ERIKSSON**	C, Timra (Swe.)
84	**STIAN SOLBERG**	D, Farjestad (Swe.)
85	**ETHAN GAUTHIER**	RW, Drummondville (QMJHL)
86	**LUCA DEL BEL BELLUZ**	C, Cleveland (AHL)
87	**ILYA NABOKOV**	G, Magnitogorsk (KHL)
88	**FILIP BYSTEDT**	C, San Jose (AHL)
89	**SAM O'REILLY**	C, London (OHL)
90	**EGOR ZAVRAGIN**	G, St. Petersburg (KHL)
91	**ANTON WAHLBERG**	C, Rochester (AHL)
92	**EMIL PIENINIEMI**	D, Kingston (OHL)
93	**GAVIN BRINDLEY**	C, Cleveland (AHL)
94	**JANI NYMAN**	LW, Coachella Valley (AHL)
95	**SEAMUS CASEY**	D, Utica (AHL)
96	**MIKHAIL YEGOROV**	G, Boston University (HE)
97	**ADAM KLEBER**	D, Minnesota-Duluth (NCHC)
98	**MARCUS GIDLOF**	G, Leksand (Swe.)
99	**OSCAR FISKER MOLGAARD**	C, HV71 (Swe.)
100	**ANDREW CRISTALL**	LW, Spokane (WHL)

TOP 100 FIXTURES

MULTI-YEAR A-LIST PROSPECTS

After making the NHL as teenagers, a trio of 20-year-old D-men return to the development pages of Future Watch

IT'S RARE FOR A prospect to reappear in the pages of Future Watch after he's made it to the NHL, but that happened to three players this year.

Simon Nemec, David Jiricek and Kevin Korchinski graduated to the NHL as 19-year-olds in 2023-24, only to hit speed bumps this season and find themselves marinating in the AHL. Not surprisingly, they're all defensemen, who generally need more time to develop. They remain outstanding prospects and will surely be back in the NHL in short order. They join a large number of A-list prospects who have been part of the top 100 for multiple years.

Here's a list of youngsters who have been ranked within the Future Watch top 100 dating back three or more seasons. We asked a panel of scouts to forecast their outlook five-to-10 years down the road.

Some players – Alexander Nikishin, Maveric Lamoureux, Isaac Howard – have been trending up the entire time. Others, such as Danila Yurov, Liam Ohgren, Matt Savoie, Brad Lambert, Filip Bystedt, Nathan Gaucher and Filip Mesar, have been going in reverse. **– BRIAN COSTELLO**

PLAYER, TEAM	FW25	FW24	FW23	FW22	FW21
Shakir Mukhamadullin, D, SJ	68	48	42	50	87
Brendan Brisson, C, Veg	77	77	68	39	77
Jesper Wallstedt, G, Min	37	16	8	14	
Brennan Othmann, LW, NYR	45	29	31	24	
Fedor Svechkov, C, Nsh	51	81	85	32	
Fabian Lysell, RW, Bos	55	32	21	54	
Scott Morrow, D, Car	65	78	48	52	
Sebastian Cossa, G, Det	69	80	32	28	
Isak Rosen, RW, Buf	–	62	73	78	
Xavier Bourgault, RW, Ott	–	97	45	49	
Jimmy Snuggerud, RW, StL	8	7	17		
Simon Nemec, D, NJ	14	NHL	6		
Alexander Nikishin, D, Car	18	28	30	–	–
Lian Bichsel, D, Dal	21	51	44		
Jonathan Lekkerimaki, RW, Van	22	11	47		
David Jiricek, D, Min	25	NHL	5		
Denton Mateychuk, D, Clb	27	37	29		
Kevin Korchinski, D, Chi	28	NHL	14		
Ivan Miroshnichenko, LW, Wsh	43	40	56		
Danila Yurov, RW, Min	50	42	41		
Maveric Lamoureux, D, Uth	56	61	86		
Joakim Kemell, RW, Nsh	57	17	24		
Liam Ohgren, LW, Min	59	58	53		
Noah Ostlund, C, Buf	60	25	55		
Matt Savoie, C, Edm	61	38	28		
Isaac Howard, LW, TB	73	76	80		
Rutger McGroarty, RW, Pit	76	35	57		
Brad Lambert, C, Wpg	78	68	62		
Nikita Chibrikov, RW, Wpg	80	63	82	–	
Filip Bystedt, C, SJ	88	70	27		
Jani Nyman, LW, Sea	94	–	97		
Owen Beck, C, Mtl	–	60	84		
Lukas Cormier, D, Veg	–	71	83	–	–
Nathan Gaucher, C, Ana	–	88	66		
Filip Mesar, RW, Mtl	–	89	54		
William Dufour, RW, NYI	–	90	94	–	–

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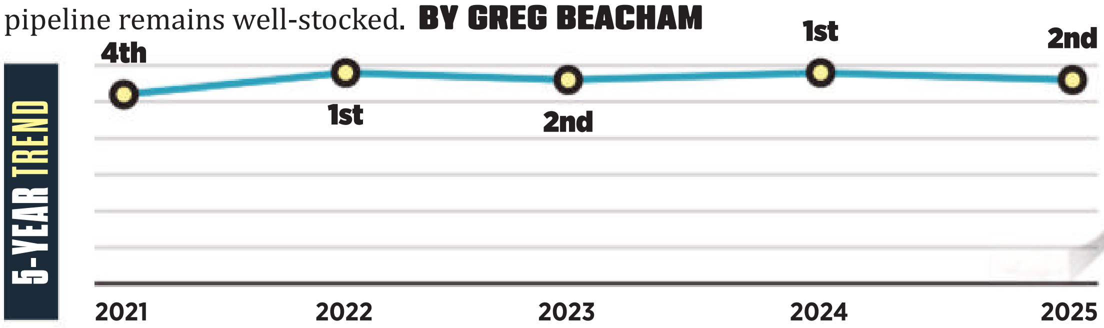
The Hockey News

ANAHEIM DUCKS

THE DUCKS HAVE BEGUN reaping the harvests of the high picks that resulted from six consecutive non-playoff seasons. First-rounders Leo Carlsson, Mason McTavish, Trevor Zegras and Pavel Mintyukov have seized NHL roster spots, and Anaheim turned Jamie Drysdale into Cutter Gauthier via trade. These prime prospects have yet to become NHL stars, but GM Pat Verbeek has tremendous leeway from ownership to wait for this promising foundation to solidify into something concrete. The good news from all those bad seasons is the Ducks' pipeline remains well-stocked. **BY GREG BEACHAM**



TRISTAN LUNEAU

1 BECKETT SENNECKE

RW, 19, 6-4, 195
Oshawa (OHL)
45–35–42–77–53
2024 draft, 3rd overall

OVERALL 3

Canada leaving Sennecke off their WJC roster left many scratching their heads. That's because the rangy winger's growing game already had him as one of the OHL's best scorers and the No. 3 pick last June. The Ducks love his tenacity. He's an exceptional playmaker and puckhandler for his age and size, and Anaheim could use his help in both areas. As for that WJC snub? Sennecke answered with nine goals and 22 points in eight December games for the Generals.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

2 TRISTAN LUNEAU

D, 21, 6-2, 215
San Diego (AHL)
34–5–24–29–12
2022 draft, 53rd overall

OVERALL 44

The heady D-man is back on track after playing only 13 games last season due to illness and a viral knee infection. The Ducks believe he looks comfortable in the AHL, punctuating his gritty, puck-moving game with flashes of talent and toughness. He hasn't looked out-matched in brief big-league stints the past two seasons, but he's working on spacing and timing in the 'A.' Anaheim's brass thinks he'll be a long-term key component, particularly after he raises his power-play contributions.

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2025-26

3 STIAN SOLBERG

D, 19, 6-2, 194
Farjestad (Swe.)
38–2–7–9–12
2024 draft, 23rd overall

OVERALL 84

Verbeek showed how much he values a hardnosed, hurting game when the Ducks named Radko Gudas captain. Solberg plays with a similar edge, but the Norwegian is more promising at both ends of the ice. The Ducks believe Solberg, who was the youngest player at the 2024 WJC, can hone his game in the coming years while maintaining the unruly streak that makes him a nightmare to play against. Team brass thinks his physical approach and old-school makeup will shine in North America.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

4 SAM COLANGELO

RW, 23, 6-2, 211
San Diego (AHL)
34–18–15–33–20
2020 draft, 36th overall

Colangelo gets rave reviews from teammates in both the NHL and AHL. He's big enough to play a physical game, fast enough to be effective defensively and smart enough to make his teammates better with slick passing and anticipatory plays. He is growing into the type of glue guy every NHL roster needs, and his supporters within the organization hope he'll nail down a job soon. He has shown signs of offensive growth in the AHL, and that will be what brings him back to Anaheim for good.

FW24 | nr **NHL** | 2025-26

5 YEGOR SIDOROV

RW, 20, 6-0, 184
San Diego (AHL)
36–10–12–22–14
2023 draft, 85th overall

Sidorov went from scoring 90 goals in two seasons for WHL Saskatoon to holding his own this winter in San Diego. The Ducks love the Belarusian's creativity with the puck, sneaky shot and determination to improve. He's adjusted quickly to the pace and physicality of the pros, going on several stretches of offensive excellence with his shiftiness and stickwork. The Ducks want to boost his physical game so he can maintain his play through an NHL schedule, but he is moving swiftly toward his ultimate goals.

FW24 | nr **NHL** | 2026-27

6 NATHAN GAUCHER

C, 21, 6-3, 222
San Diego (AHL)
47–6–7–13–66
2022 draft, 22nd overall

A physical agitator and opportunistic forechecker with deceptive skill on the puck.

7 TYSON HINDS

D, 21, 6-3, 199
San Diego (AHL)
46–3–8–11–28
2021 draft, 76th overall

Impressive skater and physical presence with potential as a PP contributor.

8 NOAH WARREN

D, 20, 6-4, 224
San Diego (AHL)
41–0–3–3–26
2022 draft, 42nd overall

A rangy force in his own end who is working on improving his offensive skill.

9 TARIN SMITH

D, 18, 6-2, 190
Everett (WHL)
52–14–34–48–38
2024 draft, 79th overall

Promising playmaker with solid 'D' fundamentals. Could grow into a power-play QB.

10 LUCAS PETTERSSON

C, 18, 5-11, 168
Ostersund (Swe.2)
23–8–7–15–8
2024 draft, 35th overall

A steady two-way forward with playmaking acumen and a sneaky wrist shot.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | LEO CARLSSON, C, 20; CUTTER GAUTHIER, LW, 21; PAVEL MINTYUKOV, D, 21; OLEN ZELLWEGER, D, 21

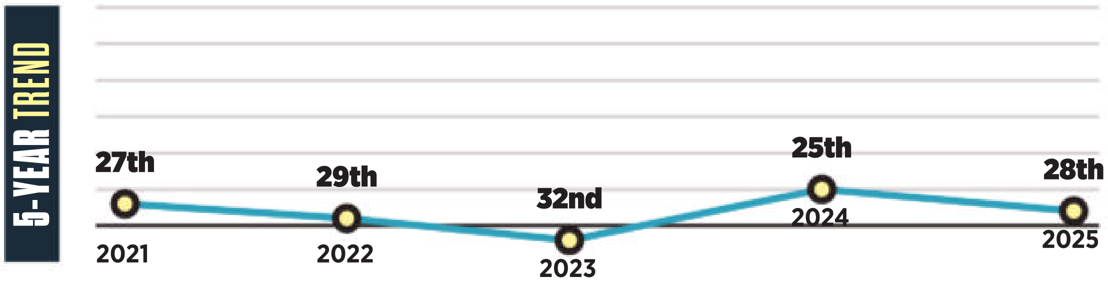
PHOTO BY SAN DIEGO GULLS

NHL C | RANK: 28TH

BOSTON BRUINS

FABIAN **LYSELL**

BRUINS GM DON SWEENEY used the Linus Ullmark trade to get back into the first round of the draft, and 2024 top pick Dean Letourneau is developing at Boston College with fellow pipeliners Andre Gasseau and Oskar Jellvik. Amateur scouting is a sensitive subject in Boston, as few draft picks have impacted a roster that's finally vulnerable to age, mileage and salary-cap constraints. After firing coach Jim Montgomery and promoting Joe Sacco, the B's rediscovered their structure but still struggled to score. Matthew Poitras is back from an AHL stint, but no other forwards have broken down the door. **BY MICK COLAGEO**



1

FABIAN **LYSELL**

RW, 22, 5-11, 188
Providence (AHL)
40–9–19–28–34
2021 draft, 21st overall

With his family visiting in Boston, Lysell made his NHL debut Dec. 28, skating 11:32 against Columbus, but he was sent right back to Providence. "He truly earned that call-up," said Providence coach Ryan Mougenel. "He was arguably our best player on the ice the night before. He's got a ton of pace. He's quite capable of going up and scoring." Mougenel said Lysell still needs to learn "how to use his body and how to create space for himself – the things that (would) keep him in the NHL."

OVERALL 55

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2025-26

2

DEAN **LETOURNEAU**

C, 19, 6-7, 221
Boston College (HE)
28–0–2–2–6
2024 draft, 25th overall

The rangy, right-shooting center has played through pain to appear in all but one game for the Eagles this season. "He's worked through some injuries in the first half and is back healthy now," said Bruins player development coordinator Adam McQuaid, noting Letourneau's progress in learning how to use his size and reach while adjusting to the faster NCAA tempo. "He's got a competitive fire to him. There's always a level of earning your opportunities. BC is a good place for him to be."

OVERALL 75

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

3

GEORGII **MERKULOV**

C, 24, 5-11, 184
Providence (AHL)
45–12–29–41–14
Free agent, April 9, 2022

Midway through his third full pro season, the Russian center was in the top five in AHL scoring. "His best attribute is he loves hockey, and he's a student of the game," Mougenel said. "He's got an ability to make plays under duress, with time. His biggest growth is how far he's come defensively." Finding a next-level niche will be key. "He needs to be in a certain spot and play with certain players, a bit of a power-play specialist," Mougenel said. "I like him on the wall. For a smaller guy, he's inside guys' hands."

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2025-26

4

BRANDON **BUSSI**

G, 26, 6-5, 218
Providence (AHL)
10-9-1, 2.79, .904
Free agent, March 30, 2022

Bussi was an AHL all-star as a rookie pro in 2022-23, but after a strong sophomore campaign, his hopes for an NHL job were dashed when the B's brought in Joonas Korpisalo to back up Jeremy Swayman. His third AHL season has been a struggle, while crease mate Michael DiPietro's 1.91 GAA ranked second in the AHL in January. "It's not the year he envisioned for himself, but we haven't been great in front of him," said Mougenel, who believes in his "battler." Bussi rallied in the new year, winning twice in late January.

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2026-27

5

ELLIOTT **GROENEWOLD**

D, 19, 6-2, 208
Quinnipiac (ECAC)
30–4–4–8–14
2024 draft, 110th overall

After the USHL second-team all-rookie selection helped the U.S. take bronze at the 2024 World Jr. A Challenge, Groenewold is already impacting the top ECAC program as a freshman. McQuaid called the left-shot D-man a "gym rat" and said his mobility and ability make him an excellent puck retriever. "He just has the right approach to the game," McQuaid said. "And there's grit there. He has the foundation to defend, be in people's faces, be disruptive. He's also growing the offensive side of his game."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

6

TREVOR **KUNTAR**

C, 23, 6-0, 201
Providence (AHL)
36–2–5–7–58
2020 draft, 89th overall

Sometimes goes over the line and ends up in the box, but Kuntar never lets up.

7

BRETT **HARRISON**

C, 21, 6-2, 190
Providence (AHL)
31–3–4–7–6
2021 draft, 85th overall

He's got the skill. It's the consistency of the daily grind that he must master.

8

RILEY **DURAN**

C, 23, 6-2, 198
Providence (AHL)
39–8–2–10–8
2020 draft, 182nd overall

Started slowly this season, but Duran is now using his speed and disruptive stick.

9

ANDRE **GASSEAU**

C, 21, 6-4, 224
Boston College (HE)
29–10–10–20–20
2021 draft, 213th overall

After changing his training regimen, the Eagles are using Gasseau in all situations.

10

CHRIS **PELOSI**

C, 19, 6-2, 183
Quinnipiac (ECAC)
30–11–8–19–8
2023 draft, 92nd overall

Plays a complete 200-foot game and shows middle-six NHL potential.

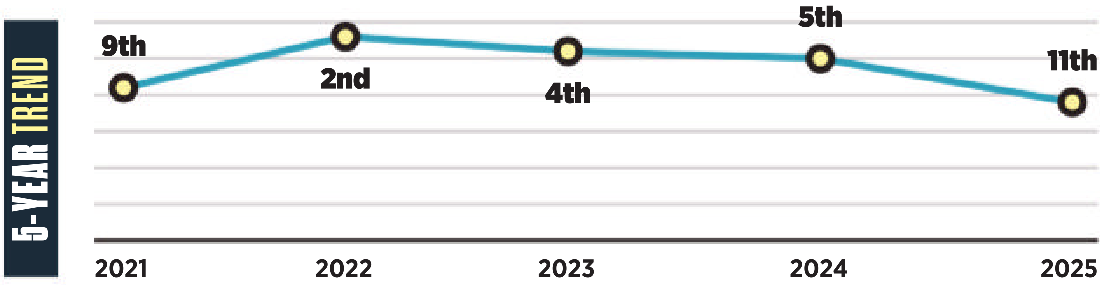
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | MATTHEW POITRAS, C, 20

TESSA MCANDREWS/PROVIDENCE BRUINS

B+ | RANK: 11TH NHL

BUFFALO SABRES

AS HE REBUILT THE Sabres early in his tenure, GM Kevyn Adams refused to take any shortcuts and trade his top prospects for a quick fix. These days, Adams operates differently. The Sabres graduated to a new level in 2022-23, entering win-now mode when they missed the playoffs by one victory. As he illustrated in dealing Matt Savoie to the Edmonton Oilers in exchange for Ryan McLeod following last season's disappointing 12th-place finish in the East, anyone could be in play. The Sabres need immediate help as Adams works to end the NHL-record 13-year playoff drought that hangs over the franchise. **BY BILL HOPPE**



KONSTA
HELENIUS

1

KONSTA HELENIUS

C, 18, 5-11, 189
Rochester (AHL)
42-7-13-20-18
2024 draft, 14th overall

OVERALL 15

Helenius arrived in Rochester this season as a polished youngster, having spent the past two years in Finland's Liiga. "An all-around, good two-way center that's probably benefited from playing with men in Europe because he's not overwhelmed, and that's pretty rare," Adams said. Helenius put up huge numbers for a 17-year-old – 14 goals and 36 points in 51 games – with Jukurit last season. The Sabres want Helenius to play faster as he adapts to a different brand of hockey.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

2

NOAH OSTLUND

C, 20, 5-11, 171
Rochester (AHL)
27-5-9-14-12
2022 draft, 16th overall

OVERALL 60

Rochester coach Mike Leone said Ostlund, who's in his first full season in the AHL, is as talented and detailed as anyone he has coached. In fact, he believes the Swede is perhaps the most responsible player in the defensive zone who has ever played under him. Ostlund possesses a maturity rarely seen in rookies. Still, it hasn't translated into offense, with just five goals in his first 27 games this season. "If he learns how to finish, he's going to be a really good player in the NHL," Leone said.

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

3

ANTON WAHLBERG

C, 19, 6-4, 198
Rochester (AHL)
39-8-12-20-0
2023 draft, 39th overall

OVERALL 91

Wahlberg has quickly established himself as an aggressive and physical presence capable of parking himself around the net to score or disrupting plays by forechecking. "He has the ability to play with the top-line guys because he can see the ice and skate," Leone said. "When he's driving pucks to the net...he has an ability to protect pucks and extend plays in the O-zone because he doesn't get hit and pinned a lot." Leone wants Wahlberg to play with more urgency.

FW24 | No. 6 **NHL** | 2026-27

4

ADAM KLEBER

D, 18, 6-5, 210
Minnesota-Duluth (NCHC)
25-2-2-4-11
2024 draft, 42nd overall

OVERALL 97

When Adams watched Kleber at this year's WJC, he noticed the youngster had taken "massive steps" over the last year. "He looks like a guy that is getting better and better with the puck," Adams said. "He needs to work on his puck skills and work on his feet, but he has a big, long frame, and he handled himself really, really well at the world juniors." Adams is also impressed with Kleber's play in his first year at Minnesota-Duluth: "He's done a really nice job in college as a true freshman."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

5

ISAK ROSEN

RW, 21, 6-0, 180
Rochester (AHL)
45-25-18-43-8
2021 draft, 14th overall

The exploits of Jiri Kulich and other recent first-round picks have overshadowed Rosen, who has morphed into one of the AHL's top goal-scorers in his third season. "He's attacking the game and getting to the middle of the rink," Leone said. "He has the ability to strip guys because he's tenacious on the puck. He's not going to overpower you with physicality, but he can get there quick and use his stick." Leone said Rosen's wall play – winning battles and advancing pucks – will help him get back to the NHL.

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2025-26

6

DEVON LEVI

G, 23, 6-0, 192
Rochester (AHL)
16-6-2, 2.36, .911
Trade (Fla), July 24, 2021

After early struggles in Buffalo, the agile Levi has become the Amerks' backbone.

7

VSEVOLOD KOMAROV

D, 21, 6-4, 208
Rochester (AHL)
45-2-10-12-69
2022 draft, 134th overall

Seeing about 18 minutes a game in AHL. Has offensive skills but also plays physically.

8

MAXIM STRBAK

D, 19, 6-2, 200
Michigan State (Big Ten)
26-1-14-15-16
2023 draft, 45th overall

Adams said the Slovak teen projects to be a hardnosed two-way defender.

9

BRODIE ZIEMER

RW, 19, 5-11, 190
Minnesota (Big Ten)
30-11-8-19-21
2024 draft, 71st overall

Ziemer is an intelligent, reliable player who's a "coach's dream," according to Adams.

10

RYAN JOHNSON

D, 23, 6-1, 195
Rochester (AHL)
43-0-7-7-26
2019 draft, 31st overall

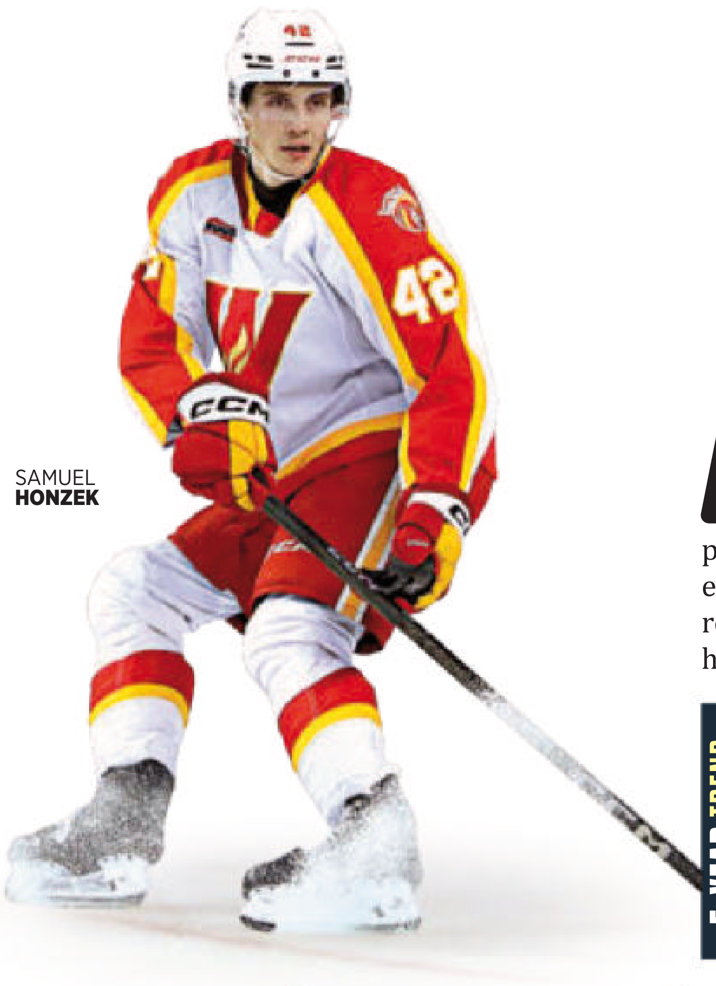
Leone said the puck-mover has been perhaps the Amerks' most consistent player.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | ZACH BENSON, LW, 19; JIRI KULICH, C, 20

MICHELEIN VELUVOLU/ROCHESTER AMERICANS

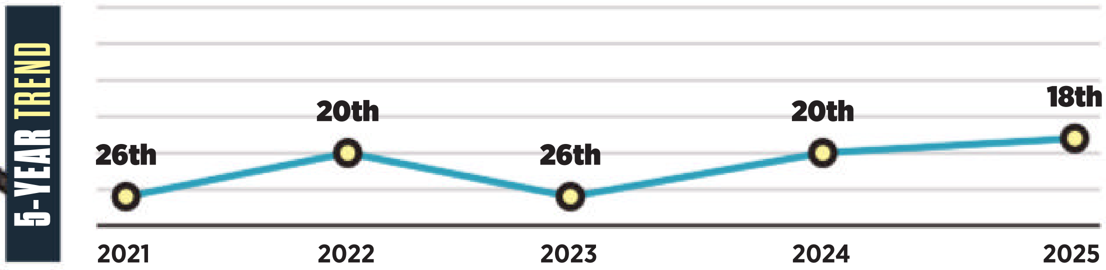
NHL B- | RANK: 18TH

CALGARY FLAMES



SAMUEL **HONZEK**

AS THE FLAMES EMBARK on a youth movement – not entirely rebuilding but certainly adjusting the average age – you might think their prospect pool lacks depth. You'd be wrong. While graduating the likes of Connor Zary, Matt Coronato and Martin Pospisil the past couple of years, there are plenty remaining. One big reason is the Flames had what was arguably their best-ever draft last June. With a focus on high-end skill, Calgary landed a pair of first-rounders who look like future stars. The prospect pool is deep, and some of the kids have dipped their toes into the NHL successfully. **BY STEVE MACFARLANE**



1

ZAYNE PAREKH

D, 19, 6-0, 185
Saginaw (OHL)
48–27–51–78–69
2024 draft, 9th overall

Team Canada decided Parekh wasn't the right fit for the world juniors, but it was obvious they could've used the offensively gifted defenseman. Parekh backs up his confidence with bold play. He got a long look in training camp before being returned to junior. It won't be long before the right-shot blueliner cracks the NHL roster and finds his way to the point on the power play. Already the highest-scoring D-man in Spirit history, he's on pace for a second straight 90-point season.

OVERALL 6

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2025-26

2

SAMUEL HONZEK

LW, 20, 6-4, 195
Calgary (AHL)
37–7–11–18–14
2023 draft, 16th overall

Honzek is on the brink of an NHL breakthrough. He was one of the surprise stories at camp and made the Flames' roster before being slowed by injury. He was sent to the AHL after just five games (and no points). In the pre-season, Honzek displayed great skill combined with an aggressive style. Flames coach Ryan Huska thought he'd be back soon, but Honzek hasn't put up the numbers many expected after his impressive pre-season. He's still finding his way in his first pro campaign.

OVERALL 53

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

3

MATVEI GRIDIN

RW, 18, 6-1, 189
Shawinigan (QMJHL)
49–29–37–66–27
2024 draft, 28th overall

The Flames' second first-round pick in a stellar 2024 draft, Gridin has impressed. After posting great numbers in the USHL last year, he made the move to the QMJHL. Following Gridin's strong showing at camp, Huska made a prediction about the highly skilled and physically mature teenager: "I almost envision him as a guy that's going to go away, and he's going to dominate and come back next year and be in a position to make our team." Gridin has lived up to that so far as a top scorer in the 'Q.'

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

4

ANDREW BASHA

LW, 19, 6-0, 187
Medicine Hat (WHL)
23–9–20–29–30
2024 draft, 41st overall

After Basha was hurt in January, the only way he will play again this season is if his team goes on a deep playoff run. There is a chance, with the Tigers among the top WHL clubs, but it's safe to say Basha's 29 points in 23 games will be his lasting mark on the regular season. He's not an elite offensive talent, but he has enough skill to make an impact in any area of the ice thanks to his effort and physicality. The Calgary native, who's signed to an entry-level deal, is unafraid to battle for the puck to create chances.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

5

WILLIAM STROMGREN

LW, 21, 6-3, 190
Calgary (AHL)
46–12–26–38–10
2021 draft, 45th overall

The Swedish prospect has a great blend of high-end skill and speed, as well as the hockey sense to play a full 200-foot game. Calgary is taking a slower development approach, cognizant the young winger is only in his second pro season in North America and having a lot of success with the AHL's Wranglers. There's no reason to rush Stromgren, but he's pushing hard for his first shot at the NHL – which could happen after the trade deadline. He's made massive strides from his rookie AHL season.

FW24 | nr **NHL** | 2026-27

6

HUNTER BRZUSTEWICZ

D, 20, 16-0, 195
Calgary (AHL)
47–3–15–18–2
Trade (Van), Jan. 31, 2024

Puck-moving blueliner gaining confidence in rookie pro season. Exciting potential.

7

JEREMIE POIRIER

D, 22, 6-1, 190
Calgary (AHL)
47–3–22–25–36
2020 draft, 72nd overall

Slick offensive skill. Learning to defend better. Bouncing back from injury-marred year.

8

RORY KERINS

C, 22, 5-11, 190
Calgary (AHL)
39–22–15–37–10
2020 draft, 174th overall

AHL all-star thriving with skill and smarts. Made impression and impact in call-up.

9

ETIENNE MORIN

D, 19, 6-1, 185
Moncton (QMJHL)
49–11–33–44–28
2023 draft, 48th overall

Had Team Canada buzz as Moncton's franchise-leading point-scoring defenseman.

10

AYDAR SUNIEV

LW, 20, 6-2, 192
UMass (HE)
25–14–13–27–14
2023 draft, 80th overall

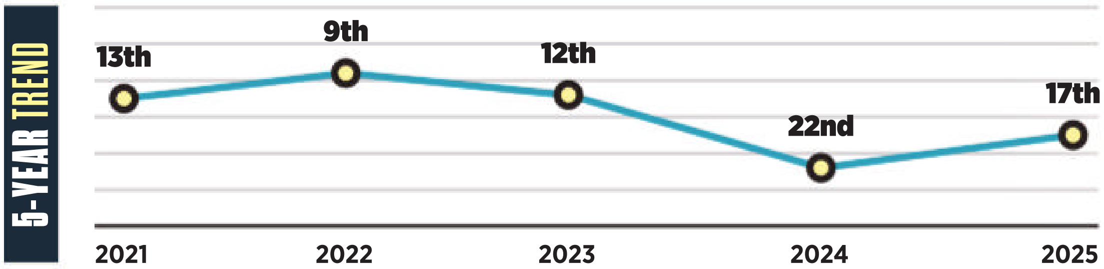
Showing major offensive talent in sophomore season. Hobey Baker candidate.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

DAVID MOLL/CALGARY WRANGLERS

CAROLINA HURRICANES

THE EMPHASIS THAT THE Hurricanes have placed on skill above all else in the draft was on full display when Jackson Blake – sixth on this list a year ago – impressed and made the team out of North Dakota. Carolina took him in the fourth round (109th overall) in 2021 despite concerns over his size, and he's hit double-digits in goals as an NHL rookie. Blake has a lot in common with the rest of the prospect pool at forward, but the next impact players will surely come from the blueline, in the form of big two-way D-man Alexander Nikishin and offensive specialist Scott Morrow. Their NHL arrivals are imminent. **BY LUKE DECOCK**



ALEXANDER **NIKISHIN**

1 ALEXANDER NIKISHIN

D, 23, 6-3, 196
St. Petersburg (KHL)
50–13–23–36–22
2020 draft, 69th overall

OVERALL 18

Nikishin is expected to sign and jump straight into the Hurricanes' lineup when his KHL season ends. He's considered one of the best players in the world not playing in the NHL. He's big, mean, skilled and dominating the KHL at 23. If there is a concern, it's a concussion he sustained in January, although he made a quick return to action. The Hurricanes are counting on Nikishin to contribute immediately, obviating the need to add defensive depth at the trade deadline.

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2025-26

2 BRADLY NADEAU

LW, 19, 5-11, 172
Chicago (AHL)
40–19–15–34–24
2023 draft, 30th overall

OVERALL 40

After leaving NCAA Maine and making his NHL debut last spring, Nadeau is one of the youngest players in the AHL. He's been one of Chicago's top goal-scorers and had a strong WJC for Canada. He wasn't as impressive as the Canes hoped he would be in camp, but he's made up for it. Nadeau is a gifted scorer who skates well, but he's still learning to play in a more structured environment. It's easy to forget he's jumped three levels in three years, from the BCHL to the NCAA to the AHL.

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2026-27

3 SCOTT MORROW

D, 22, 6-2, 195
Chicago (AHL)
44–11–20–31–35
2021 draft, 40th overall

OVERALL 65

Getting his first taste of pro hockey, Morrow will have the chance to fill any openings on the right side, now or next season. He has adjusted quickly to each new level, and that's held true in the AHL, but he needs time to adapt to the aggressive defensive system employed by the Canes. There are far fewer concerns on offense, where his mobility and vision make him a threat. That will be his calling card in the NHL, but he must develop a more well-rounded game to contribute fully.

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

4 NIKITA ARTAMONOV

LW, 19, 5-11, 187
Nizhny Novgorod (KHL)
51–17–14–31–20
2024 draft, 50th overall

OVERALL 74

Artamonov is built for how the Hurricanes play, at a high pace with a high motor, and he's been productive, proving his draft-year success wasn't a fluke. With Artamonov's shot, defensive acumen and versatility, the Canes envision him being able to fill a variety of roles. He's a player who should benefit from playing on the smaller ice in a system where he's asked to forecheck aggressively. Artamonov is the latest product of Carolina's recent draft focus on undervalued Russians.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

5 FELIX UNGER SORUM

C, 19, 5-11, 170
Chicago (AHL)
38–3–11–14–8
2023 draft, 62nd overall

The Hurricanes drafted Unger Sorum as a winger, but after seeing him play center for Sweden at the World Championship last spring, they asked him to make the switch full-time to take advantage of his hockey sense. He's adjusting to North America in his AHL rookie season, but his progress is visible in flashes when he makes plays others don't see because he thinks the game at such a high level. Size and strength remain concerns, but he's continuing to learn how to play through contact.

FW24 | No. 5 **NHL** | 2027-28

6 DOMINIK BADINKA

D, 19, 6-3, 183
Malmo (Swe.)
40–2–3–5–14
2024 draft, 34th overall

Should thrive when allowed to play more aggressively in Hurricanes' system.

7 NOEL FRANSEN

D, 19, 6-0, 183
Vasteras (Swe.2)
44–3–17–20–6
2024 draft, 39th overall

Ability to walk blueline and make people miss is elite. Needs to play stronger.

8 ALEXANDER RYKOV

RW, 19, 6-0, 176
Chelyabinsk (Rus.2)
22–7–7–14–16
2023 draft, 100th overall

Two-way winger who can create in tight spaces. Has been slowed by injuries.

9 JAYDEN PERRON

RW, 20, 5-9, 175
North Dakota (NCHC)
26–9–8–17–2
2023 draft, 94th overall

Offensive skill and hockey sense haven't translated to production at NCAA level yet.

10 JOEL NYSTROM

D, 22, 5-11, 170
Farjestad (Swe.)
42–5–18–23–8
2021 draft, 219th overall

Small but has blossomed. Already signed NHL deal and will be in North America soon.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | JACKSON BLAKE, RW, 21

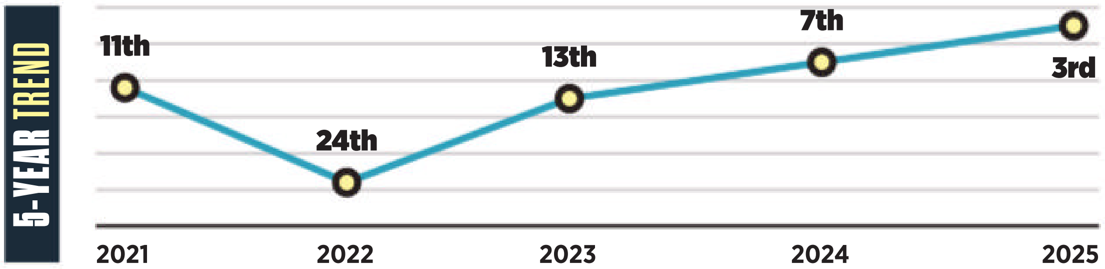
ILYA SMIRNOV/KHL PHOTO

NHL | **A-** | **RANK: 3RD**

ARTYOM **LEVSHUNOV**

CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

THOUGH GM KYLE DAVIDSON'S ploy to drive the franchise forward with veteran talent hasn't succeeded, it has allowed Chicago to exercise more patience with up-and-comers. A prime example is Frank Nazar, who got his feet wet in the AHL before being integrated into regular middle-six minutes with the big club. Chicago has also slowly worked in defenders Wyatt Kaiser and Ethan Del Mastro, all the while giving Nolan Allan games but limiting his exposure. Another trying season sees Chicago positioned to score a top-three draft selection, and several high picks only serve to bolster the prospect pool. **BY JARED CLINTON**



1

ARTYOM LEVSHUNOV

D, 19, 6-2, 209
Rockford (AHL)
43–4–13–17–42
2024 draft, 2nd overall

OVERALL 5

It wasn't long after Levshunov's arrival in Rockford that it became evident why the Blackhawks were keen to snap him up with the second-overall pick. His dynamic skating belies his size, especially his explosiveness. Not only can he leap into the rush, but he can also close space in a hurry and turn a defensive-zone takeaway into immediate offense. Patience has been the watchword with Levshunov, who has thus far been given the entire season to adjust to life in the pro ranks.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2025-26

2

KEVIN KORCHINSKI

D, 20, 6-1, 185
Rockford (AHL)
39–2–18–20–24
2022 draft, 7th overall

OVERALL 28

Last year, Korchinski was tasked with big minutes on an awful NHL squad instead of being sent back to junior. But Chicago took steps to rectify that by bouncing him back to the AHL this season. The progress he's made was apparent in a string of December NHL games. He's shown flashes of the smooth-skating, two-way presence he can be. It's important, too, he regains confidence in that version of his game, which is a far cry from the sometimes-timid blueliner he was last year.

FW24 | NHL **NHL** | 2025-26

3

SAM RINZEL

D, 20, 6-5, 190
Minnesota (Big Ten)
32–9–16–25–12
2022 draft, 25th overall

OVERALL 52

Rinzel has gone from a USHL standout to Big Ten all-rookie team and is on pace to be one of the NCAA's highest-scoring 'D' as a sophomore this year. It's led to whispers about Hobey Baker candidacy, particularly as he continues to eat up major minutes for one of the top NCAA programs. More promising for Chicago is Rinzel has started to fill out. At his size, he was proficient as a puck-on-stick defender, but he's now able to use his size to impose himself physically in the D-zone.

FW24 | No. 5 **NHL** | 2026-27

4

OLIVER MOORE

C, 20, 6-0, 185
Minnesota (Big Ten)
30–8–16–24–6
2023 draft, 19th overall

OVERALL 54

A powerhouse U.S. outfit at the WJC, where Moore wore an 'A,' let him play a secondary-scoring role. That led to only a meager uptick in output in his second world juniors, but Moore's speed and energy are game-changing attributes. He has an uncanny ability to give up three strides and still win many races. Moore hasn't shown top-end goal-scoring ability, and he's seeing his per-game offensive contributions decline this year, but his vision and passing make him a natural set-up man.

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2026-27

5

SACHA BOISVERT

C, 18, 6-2, 176
North Dakota (NCHC)
28–9–11–20–14
2024 draft, 18th overall

OVERALL 67

Boisvert blossomed in the USHL, using a quick release and heavy shot to climb to fifth in league goal-scoring ahead of the 2024 draft. The numbers aren't as eye-popping in his first year in college, but he was among North Dakota's leading scorers through January, acting as a potent power-play weapon. His focus will be on strength and learning to better use his frame, and working on his skating could see him go from special-teams triggerman to all-strengths sniper at the next level.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

6

MAREK VANACKER

LW, 18, 6-1, 170
Brantford (OHL)
31–17–12–29–26
2024 draft, 27th overall

Gifted playmaker slow to get up to speed since summer shoulder surgery.

7

COLTON DACH

C, 22, 6-4, 193
Rockford (AHL)
32–12–14–26–21
2021 draft, 62nd overall

Kirby's bro injected physicality and grit into bottom six after January call-up.

8

ROMAN KANTSEROV

RW, 20, 5-9, 176
Magnitogorsk (KHL)
34–12–16–28–8
2023 draft, 44th overall

Shifty scorer has seen steady growth but needs to round out his game.

9

NICK LARDIS

LW, 19, 5-11, 185
Brantford (OHL)
52–56–35–91–16
2023 draft, 67th overall

Shoots with power, precision and abundance. In race for OHL goal-scoring crown.

10

ADAM GAJAN

G, 20, 6-2, 180
Minnesota-Duluth (NCHC)
5-8-0, 3.64, .878
2023 draft, 35th overall

Great size, but 2023 WJC top goaltender has struggled against NCAA shooters.

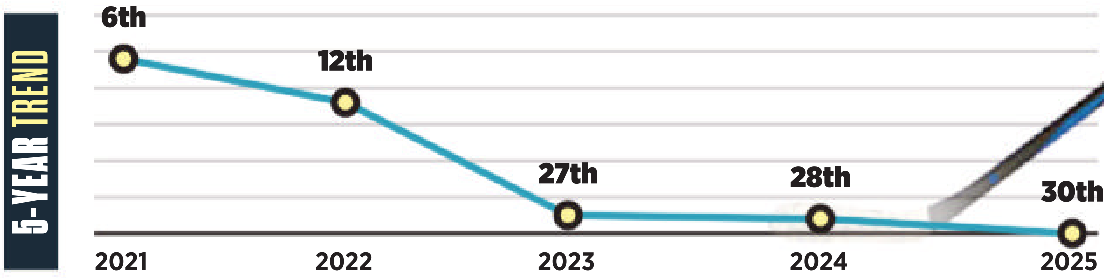
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | CONNOR BEDARD, C, 19; FRANK NAZAR, C, 21; NOLAN ALLAN, D, 21

KRISTIN OSTROWSKI/ROCKFORD ICEHOGS

C | RANK: 30TH NHL

COLORADO AVALANCHE

THE AVALANCHE DON'T shy away from trading picks and prospects to bolster their Stanley Cup chances. It's left the pipeline thin, but it has also led to some development success stories with non-traditional paths to the NHL. The Avs went older in the 2024 draft with multiple picks. That has already produced an NHL debut and could lead to help in net as soon as next season. The club has leaned into selecting Russian players, even ones with uncertain arrival timelines. Colorado has also been active with undrafted free agents, which has produced multiple regulars in the lineup. **BY COREY MASISAK**



CALUM RITCHIE

1

CALUM RITCHIE

C, 20, 6-3, 190
Oshawa (OHL)
34–14–48–62–40
2023 draft, 27th overall

OVERALL 13

Availability issues allowed Ritchie a chance to earn a spot on the Avs' opening-night roster, and he did so with a solid training camp. There were flashes of what he might become – a big, skilled, powerful forward – in seven NHL games, but there was also plenty of evidence he wasn't ready. He's still a dominant player in the OHL, but he'll need to work on processing decisions faster and his details without the puck. He's the one forward with clear top-six potential in the Avs' pipeline.

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2025-26

2

MIKHAIL GULYAYEV

D, 19, 5-10, 172
Omsk (KHL)
55–6–8–14–6
2023 draft, 31st overall

OVERALL 82

The big reason for optimism surrounding the small but skilled D-man is his skating ability. Gulyayev has the speed, quickness and elusiveness to be an impact NHLer. He's the most productive teenager at his position in the KHL. How he holds up against bigger players in tight quarters at NHL speed is a concern, but comparisons to Samuel Girard aren't far-fetched. Now, the big question: when will Gulyayev join the Avs? He's under contract in the KHL through 2025-26.

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2027-28

3

ILYA NABOKOV

G, 21, 6-0, 179
Magnitogorsk (KHL)
20-14-0, 2.20, .925
2024 draft, 38th overall

OVERALL 87

Nabokov is a small but quick goalie who is following up a monster first year in the KHL with a similar sophomore campaign. Last year, he was named playoff MVP, leading Magnitogorsk to a title. Nabokov holds the "goalie of the future" tag. He could arrive next season, though the Avs already have two NHL goalies signed for 2025-26. Will Nabokov be OK with some time in the AHL next season before a spot next to Mackenzie Blackwood is more likely to open for 2026-27?

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

4

IVAN IVAN

C, 22, 6-0, 190
Colorado (AHL)
12–1–4–5–6
Free agent, March 5, 2024

Ivan just looks and moves like an NHLer, so much so that it's hard to believe he went undrafted. He lost a year in the QMJHL because of the pandemic but signed an AHL deal with the Colorado Eagles and eventually an NHL pact with the Avs. He became a fixture for the undermanned Avs this year, then hit a rookie wall. He has NHL skating ability, can make plays under duress and impressed Avs coaches with how he thinks the game. He must prove he can maintain his early-season level over an entire campaign.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2025-26

5

NIKITA PRISHCHEPOV

C, 21, 6-1, 194
Colorado (AHL)
35–8–11–19–24
2024 draft, 217th overall

There were 216 players selected before Prishchepov in the 2024 draft. He beat 214 of them to the NHL. Like Nabokov, he was a double-overage draft pick, but he debuted with the Avalanche in early November. At his best, he looked like a responsible player who could help create offense in a limited role. He also faded out of games after a few promising showings. He has been the most productive young player on a veteran-laden AHL Eagles team. Like Ivan, he could find a regular NHL depth role next season.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

6

MATT STIENBURG

C, 24, 6-1, 183
Colorado (AHL)
3–1–1–2–2
2019 draft, 63rd overall

Impressed Avs coaches with tenacity, physicality. Low ceiling/high floor energy guy.

7

WILLIAM ZELLERS

LW, 18, 5-11, 170
Green Bay (USHL)
36–32–20–52–36
2024 draft, 76th overall

Dominant, highlight-filled season. Best odds behind Ritchie to be top-six NHLer.

8

SEAN BEHRENS

D, 21, 5-10, 177
Colorado (AHL)
injured, has not played
2021 draft, 61st overall

Lost season to knee injury. He's smart and strong defensively despite slight stature.

9

TAYLOR MAKAR

LW, 23, 6-4, 210
Maine (HE)
29–13–11–24–26
2021 draft, 220th overall

Cale's younger bro has NHL size, speed. Playing with more pop since transfer from UMass.

10

OSKAR OLAUSSON

RW, 22, 6-1, 180
Colorado (AHL)
44–9–9–18–26
2021 draft, 28th overall

He moves and shoots like an NHLer, but he plays on the perimeter too much.

CARTER SMITH/OSHAWA GENERALS

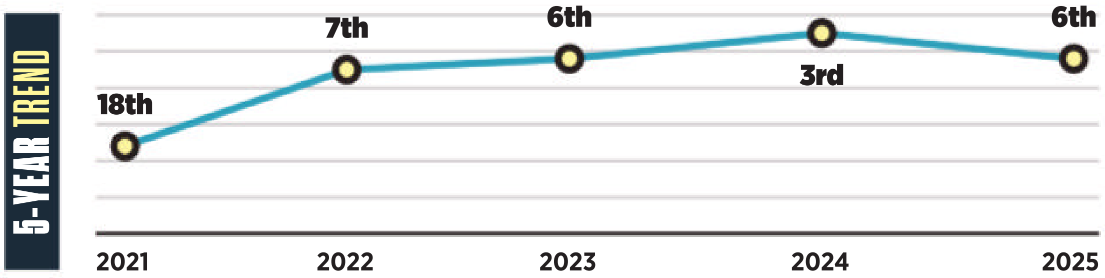
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

NHL | B+ | RANK: 6TH

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

DENTON
MATEYCHUK

THE BLUE JACKETS STILL have one of the NHL's deepest talent pipelines, but they're also leaning on a core group of youngsters they've drafted and developed. Already leading the charge in the NHL are forwards Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson, Dmitri Voronkov, Cole Sillinger, Luca Del Bel Belluz, Mikael Pyyhtia and Yegor Chinakhov, along with defensemen Denton Mateychuk and Jake Christiansen. Plus, goalie Jet Greaves also shone when recalled from Cleveland, who remain one of the AHL's better teams despite Mateychuk and Del Bel Belluz being called up to Columbus mid-season. **BY BRIAN HEDGER**



1

DENTON MATEYCHUK

D, 20, 5-11, 185
Cleveland (AHL)
27–9–16–25–10
2022 draft, 12th overall

Mateychuk impressed in a second consecutive preseason, but the Blue Jackets' defensive depth didn't leave a spot open for him. He didn't complain, instead going to Cleveland to begin his pro career and helping the Monsters get off to a great start by scoring at nearly a point-a-game pace. An injury opened the door for Mateychuk to make his NHL debut Dec. 23, and he hasn't looked back. He's already locked up a spot on the second D-pairing and second power-play unit.

OVERALL 27

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2025-26

2

CAYDEN LINDSTROM

C, 19, 6-4, 215
Medicine Hat (WHL)
injured, has not played
2024 draft, 4th overall

Lindstrom is one of the only prospects from the first round in 2024 who hasn't signed an entry-level contract, primarily due to a lingering back injury. Lindstrom was limited at NHL development camp, wasn't a full participant in training camp, has spent the season rehabbing in Columbus and underwent a microdiscectomy Nov. 19. He's not expected to return to the WHL this season. His size, strength and talent are easy to dream about, but returning to full health is the key for him.

OVERALL 30

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

3

LUCA DEL BEL BELLUZ

C, 21, 6-1, 185
Cleveland (AHL)
37–18–21–39–6
2022 draft, 44th overall

Prior to helping Cleveland make a deep run in the AHL playoffs last spring, Del Bel Belluz scored his first NHL goal on his first shot during his debut in a season-ending victory over Carolina. It was a sign of things to come from Del Bel Belluz, who was leading the AHL in scoring before being recalled for center depth. Anchoring either the second or third line, depending on coach Dean Evason's lineup machinations, the rookie pivot is more than staying afloat at the NHL level.

OVERALL 86

FW24 | No. 6 **NHL** | 2025-26

4

GAVIN BRINDLEY

C, 20, 5-9, 168
Cleveland (AHL)
30–5–9–14–8
2023 draft, 34th overall

Under former GM Jarmo Kekalainen, the Jackets tried to strike gold by drafting undersized forwards in the molds of Brayden Point or Brad Marchand. Brindley was the highest pick in a group that includes Jordan Dumais, James Malatesta, William Whitelaw and Luca Pinelli. After leveraging collegiate eligibility to burn the first year of his entry-level deal, Brindley made his NHL debut last year. Now an AHL rookie, he's trying to overcome his size limitations with high-end skills.

OVERALL 93

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2027-28

5

CHARLIE ELICK

D, 19, 6-3, 203
Tri-City (WHL)
52–1–11–12–49
2024 draft, 36th overall

Columbus went big at the draft last summer, taking Lindstrom fourth overall as a massive power forward and following him with a group of large defensemen. Elick was the first of those selections. He isn't an offensive blueliner, but he's a strong skater and has the kind of snarl to his game that fits perfectly with a big frame. He'll also fill out that frame with bulk in the weight room the next couple of years, which will give the Blue Jackets an imposing presence on the blueline in the future.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

6

EVAN GARDNER

G, 19, 6-1, 177
Saskatoon (WHL)
18-12-4, 3.03, .906
2024 draft, 60th overall

Undersized by NHL goalie standards, but he's very athletic and coordinated.

7

GUILLAUME RICHARD

D, 22, 6-2, 185
Providence (HE)
30–1–9–10–14
2021 draft, 101st overall

Puck-mover who shades more toward defensive side. In his final college season.

8

CORSON CEULEMANS

D, 21, 6-2, 191
Cleveland (AHL)
33–2–5–7–29
2021 draft, 25th overall

Skilled two-way defender who's struggling to contribute offensively as a professional.

9

STANISLAV SVOZIL

D, 22, 6-0, 192
Cleveland (AHL)
42–4–20–24–22
2021 draft, 69th overall

Skilled offense-minded defenseman who's biding his time in his second pro season.

10

LUCA PINELLI

C, 19, 5-9, 169
Ottawa (OHL)
38–29–21–50–45
2023 draft, 114th overall

Impressive goal-scorer who needs to work on his skating and defensive play.

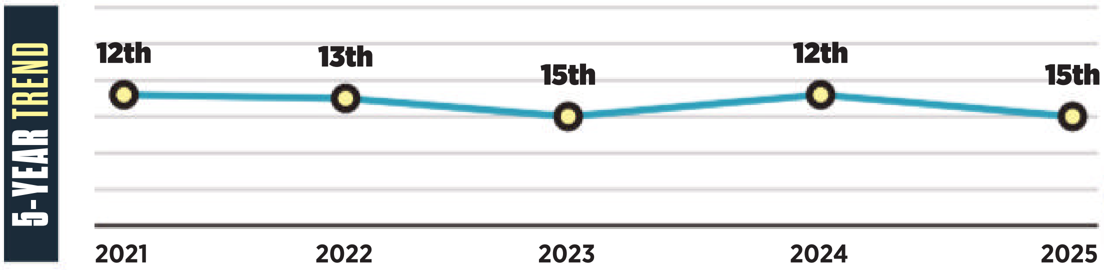
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | ADAM FANTILLI, C, 20; COLE SILLINGER, C, 21

PHOTO BY CLEVELAND MONSTERS

B | RANK: 15TH NHL

DALLAS STARS

AFTER SEVERAL YEARS WITH an abundance of top talent in the Stars' system, Mavrik Bourque and Logan Stankoven have graduated, and the list is more threadbare than before. Once you get past Lian Bichsel, Emil Hemming and Tristan Bertucci, the top-flight NHL projections become murkier. In win-now mode for Lord Stanley's Cup, Dallas is thin on early draftees, and aside from Bichsel, there are no surefire NHL contributors here. For the second year in a row, this list lacks a goaltender. Dallas has no plans to move on from Jake Oettinger, but it's always good to have prospect depth everywhere. **BY STEPHEN MESERVE**



LIAN **BICHSEL**

ANDY NIETUPSKI/TEXAS STARS

1

LIAN BICHSEL

D, 20, 6-5, 225
Texas (AHL)
28–3–6–9–36
2022 draft, 18th overall

After splitting last season across two continents, Bichsel has returned Stateside for this entire season, and he made his NHL debut in December. The big, heavy defender is playing in all situations in AHL Texas with a 23-minute-a-night workload and top-pairing duty. "He's got to work on his defending and just getting used to different situations on ice," said Dallas assistant GM Scott White. "We think the (AHL) is the best course for him." He could be a call-up for Dallas' playoff run.

OVERALL 21

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2025-26

2

EMIL HEMMING

RW, 18, 6-1, 205
Barrie (OHL)
46–15–22–37–16
2024 draft, 29th overall

Hemming came the Barrie to kick-start his North American transition. The Finnish winger's game with the Colts has been average, if not inconsistent, after he made the move. He joined Finland at the WJC, a relatively rare occurrence for recent Stars prospects, and had a slow start to the tourney. But he turned it on late and had two points in each of his last two games. "He's got to keep going and try to build off the world juniors into a good second half," White said.

OVERALL 79

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

3

TRISTAN BERTUCCI

D, 19, 6-2, 187
Barrie (OHL)
48–5–29–34–43
2023 draft, 61st overall

Another future Star developing in Barrie is Bertucci. The young D-man is playing in all situations and had a brief AHL cameo to finish last year but will transition full time to the pros next year. He is a solid offensive blueliner but, like many before him, must work on the defensive side of the game and his compete level to thrive in the pros. "(In junior), they can surf while they're playing," White said. "At the next level, you have to go harder for a shorter period of time." Bertucci is in a good spot to make a run in Barrie.

FW24 | No. 5 **NHL** | 2027-28

4

JUSTIN HRYCKOWIAN

C, 24, 5-10, 194
Texas (AHL)
41–13–26–39–21
Free agent, March 20, 2024

Hryckowian rocketed up the prospect list largely thanks to his amateur-tryout stint with AHL Texas last year. He was the team's only true center and was the defensive MVP at forward in March and April after signing as a college UFA. "He's smart, high IQ, and he's always working at his craft," White said. "He's a player the coach can trust every time he goes over the boards." Hryckowian made his NHL debut in December and has a chance to carve out a bottom-six role with his ability to win faceoffs and kill penalties.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

5

ARTTU HYRY

RW, 23, 6-1, 209
Texas (AHL)
40–17–16–33–8
Free agent, April 15, 2024

Hyry put himself in the mix to be Dallas' 13th forward coming out of the pre-season, but he took some time to heat up in the AHL with a new coach, new environs and the difficulty of changing continents. He had an 11-game point streak around the holidays and found his place on Texas' top line. He's gone back and forth to the NHL a few times and acquitted himself well. "He's got to be smart up there because his pace isn't as good as some other guys," White said. "But he has a legit chance to play regularly."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2025-26

6

MATEJ BLUMEL

RW, 24, 6-0, 198
Texas (AHL)
40–23–18–41–12
Free agent, June 6, 2022

Playing best hockey yet. Needs to add bottom-six details to stay up.

7

ARAM MINNETIAN

D, 19, 5-11, 205
Boston College (HE)
27–2–11–13–16
2023 draft, 125th overall

Good puck-mover who added solid experience in gold-winning effort at WJC.

8

NIILOPEKKA MUHONEN

D, 19, 6-5, 215
Medicine Hat (WHL)
49–3–9–12–45
2024 draft, 158th overall

Simple first-pass, third-pairing defenseman still early in his development.

9

ANGUS MACDONELL

C, 19, 5-10, 185
Brampton (OHL)
30–19–20–39–57
2023 draft, 189th overall

An undersized winger and an agitator coming off injury last year.

10

GEORGE FEGARAS

D, 20, 6-2, 212
Cornell (ECAC)
19–1–9–10–10
2022 draft, 83rd overall

Has missed time with injury. Two-way player who simply needs to play.

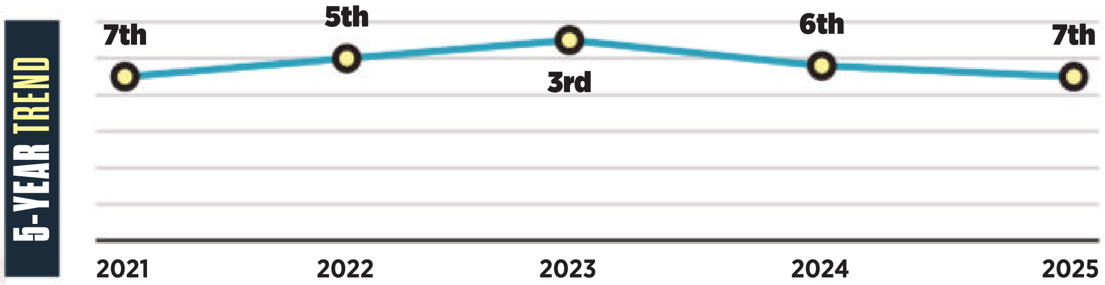
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | WYATT JOHNSTON, C, 21

NHL | **B+** | **RANK: 7TH**

AXEL
SANDIN-PELLIKKA

DETROIT RED WINGS

THE FRUITS OF GM Steve Yzerman's labor are beginning to blossom. Six of the draft picks Detroit has made since Yzerman took over as GM of the club in 2019 are now wearing the Winged Wheel. Lucas Raymond (4th overall in 2020) and Marco Kasper (8th in '22) skate on the top line with captain Dylan Larkin. Moritz Seider (6th in '19) and Simon Edvinsson (6th in '21) are top-four D-men. Beyond them, Albert Johansson (60th in '19) has been playing alongside Edvinsson, and massive winger Elmer Soderblom (159th in '19) was summoned in late January from AHL Grand Rapids for his second NHL look. **BY BOB DUFF**



1

AXEL SANDIN-PELLIKKA

D, 19, 5-11, 176
Skelleftea (Swe.)
37–11–15–26–20
2023 draft, 17th overall

The slick Swede was named top D-man at the WJC for the second year in a row, joining Wings icon Slava Fetisov as the only blueliners to do so in tournament history. He led Swedish League 'D' in scoring before leaving for Ottawa. Sandin-Pellikka can carry the puck up ice, run a PP and create chances with quick movement and passing skills. "He looks like a talented young defenseman," Yzerman said. "He's playing in the Swedish Elite League, which is a very good league, doing well."

OVERALL 9

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

2

NATE DANIELSON

C, 20, 6-1, 190
Grand Rapids (AHL)
47–4–20–24–29
2023 draft, 9th overall

It took Danielson some time to find his footing as a first-year pro. He called it a big adjustment and said it took "five or six" games to feel normal. Detroit brass loves his 200-foot game. "He does everything right, and it shows in the way he handles himself and his maturity," assistant player development director Dan Cleary said. Pat Kane, too, offered high praise: "A lot of skill. Kind of reminds me a little bit of (Connor) Bedard, the way he plays and the way he stickhandles and shoots."

OVERALL 31

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

3

TREY AUGUSTINE

G, 20, 6-1, 194
Michigan State (Big Ten)
15-5-3, 2.07, .926
2023 draft, 41st overall

Augustine has helped lead Michigan State back to prominence and starred at the WJC, backstopping the U.S. to a second straight gold. He also played for his nation at the senior worlds last year against NHLers as a 19-year-old. The mature stopper is known for his unflappable nature and consistency. "When I watch Trey, he gives me a lot of confidence," Cleary said. "He's got a great demeanor about him. He's got a calm, cool demeanor but competitive. That fire burns inside him."

OVERALL 46

FW24 | No. 5 **NHL** | 2026-27

4

MICHAEL BRANDSEGG-NYGARD

RW, 19, 6-1, 198
Skelleftea (Swe.)
33–5–6–11–49
2024 draft, 15th overall

Detroit wanted to fast-track 'MBN' to play with AHL Grand Rapids this season, but he returned to the SHL. He was sensational for Norway at last year's worlds while playing on the top line with Mats Zuccarello and Patrick Thoresen. Brandsegg-Nygard's quick release makes him dangerous around the net. "He's kind of known as a shooter, but he's a very smart player," Grand Rapids center Amadeus Lombardi said. "He makes smart, nifty passes." He's also very willing to use his size to punish foes.

OVERALL 48

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

5

SEBASTIAN COSSA

G, 22, 6-7, 220
Grand Rapids (AHL)
15-9-3, 2.25, .917
2021 draft, 15th overall

In his second full AHL year, Cossa has become a go-to goalie, earning selection to the AHL All-Star Game. "He reads plays well, and he can use his hands," crease mate Ville Husso said. Cossa's massive frame fills the net and lets him battle through screens. Cossa got his first taste of NHL action in a winning effort this year. He is a confident netminder who carries himself with swagger. "A lot of composure," Wings blueliner Moritz Seider said. "I think he lives for those kinds of opportunities."

OVERALL 69

FW24 | No. 6 **NHL** | 2025-26

6

CARTER MAZUR

LW, 22, 6-0, 188
Grand Rapids (AHL)
13–4–4–8–6
2021 draft, 70th overall

Undersized winger plays with ferocity but has also struggled to stay healthy.

7

DMITRI BUCHELNIKOV

LW, 21, 5-10, 163
Vityaz Moscow Region (KHL)
52–13–30–43–10
2022 draft, 52nd overall

Skilled winger leads his team in scoring. Selected to KHL All-Star Game.

8

EMMITT FINNIE

C, 19, 6-1, 191
Kamloops (WHL)
44–29–39–68–18
2023 draft, 201st overall

Late pick quickly earned NHL deal. Strong skater plays a complete game. Born leader.

9

MAX PLANTE

LW, 19, 5-11, 180
Minnesota-Duluth (NCHC)
15–7–12–19–8
2024 draft, 47th overall

Tremendous hockey sense. Moves the puck really well. Very deceptive skater.

10

ELMER SODERBLOM

LW, 23, 6-8, 248
Grand Rapids (AHL)
38–5–12–17–29
2019 draft, 159th overall

Hulking winger uses size to protect the puck. Learning to be more physical.

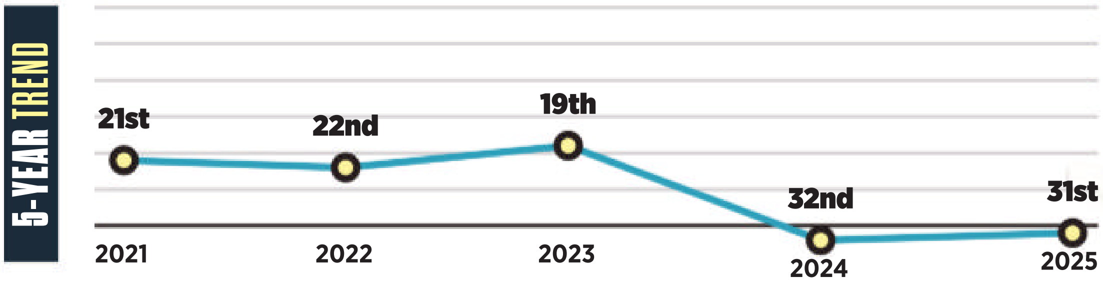
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | MARCO KASPER, C, 20

JORGEN BERGKVIST/SKELLEFTEA AIK

C- | RANK: 31ST NHL

EDMONTON OILERS

THE OILERS' NHL ROSTER is heavy on veterans, with just two regulars born in the 2000s. And while the team's quest for the Cup has led to several picks and prospects being sacrificed for immediate help, the club significantly revamped its prospect pool this summer. Boosted by a pair of off-season trades, the top of the list is now younger, and Edmonton's seven picks in 2024 matched the number of acquisitions from the previous two years combined. More prospects in the pipeline mean more lottery tickets for assistant GM/Bakersfield GM Keith Gretzky and Co. Those could turn into valuable pieces down the road. **BY CAROL SCHRAM**



MATT **SAVOIE**

1 MATT SAVOIE

C, 21, 5-9, 179
Bakersfield (AHL)
45–13–24–37–18
Trade (Buf), July 5, 2024

OVERALL 61

By swapping Ryan McLeod for local boy Savoie, the Oilers added a versatile, hyper-skilled forward. Savoie helped the Moose Jaw Warriors to their first WHL title and Memorial Cup berth last year. Now in the AHL, Savoie is learning from Bakersfield's vets while playing big minutes in all situations. "It's important to kill penalties because when you go up to the NHL, if you're not top six, it's hard to get on the power play," Gretzky said. "He's got a good stick, he's smart, and he's a speedy guy."

FW24 | 3 (Buf) **NHL** | 2025-26

2 SAM O'REILLY

C, 18, 6-1, 190
London (OHL)
49–18–33–51–31
2024 draft, 32nd overall

OVERALL 89

O'Reilly generated buzz heading into the draft after showcasing his mature two-way game during London's OHL title run. When O'Reilly was still there at the end of Round 1, head scout Rick Pracey convinced Oilers brass to acquire pick No. 32 to snag the right-shot pivot. The former D-man draws rave reviews for his play away from the puck and hockey sense, and Gretzky said he can complement the Oil's strong core of centers: "He's not flashy, but he gets the job done."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

3 BEAU AKEY

D, 20, 6-0, 183
Barrie (OHL)
39–4–22–26–24
2023 draft, 56th overall

The return of Akey has strengthened coach Marty Williamson's blueline as the Barrie Colts look to make a championship push this spring. After missing nearly all of last season following shoulder surgery, Akey received a vote of confidence when he made Canada's WJC team this winter. Akey is a smooth skater with a good frame who plays on the right side. He's a strong puck-carrier who puts defense first. He's tracking to be Edmonton's top blueline prospect when he graduates to the pros next season.

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2027-28

4 EEMIL VINNI

G, 19, 6-3, 187
HIFK Jr. (Fin.)
4-3-0, 2.02, .910
2024 draft, 64th overall

Heading into the 2024 draft, the rangy Vinni was ranked first among international goalies after logging 37 games in Finland's second-tier Mestis. He also earned a WJC roster spot but didn't see game action. Injuries have limited his workload this year. He's bounced around when healthy, but he got top-level pro action with HIFK in December. Vinni plays a hybrid style. His calling cards are his athleticism and his willingness to do anything to make a save. He's the Oilers' highest pick in net since Olivier Rodrigue.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2029-30

5 OLIVIER RODRIGUE

G, 24, 6-1, 175
Bakersfield (AHL)
14-10-5, 2.86, .906
2018 draft, 62nd overall

After spending four pro seasons with his father, Sylvain, as his goalie coach, Rodrigue is now being mentored in Bakersfield by Kelly Guard. Somewhat undersized, Rodrigue is working to add strength. Guard has made battling for position and finding pucks in heavy traffic critical points of emphasis. Rodrigue has gotten the lion's share of AHL starts for the Condors this season. "Technically, he's very sound," Gretzky said. "Right now, he has the ball and is running with it, and he's done a pretty good job."

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2025-26

6 MAKSIM BEREZKIN

LW, 23, 6-2, 201
Yaroslavl (KHL)
55–13–23–36–18
2020 draft, 138th overall

Power forward putting up points with his KHL contract set to expire at year's end.

7 ROBY JARVENTIE

LW, 22, 6-3, 209
Bakersfield (AHL)
2–0–2–2–0
Trade (Ott), July 15, 2024

"A big kid with a big shot," Gretzky said. Has been held back by repeated injuries.

8 MATVEY PETROV

LW, 21, 6-2, 200
Bakersfield (AHL)
35–8–6–14–8
2021 draft, 180th overall

Strong and skilled. Had his off-season training hampered by late-season knee injury.

9 MAXIMUS WANNER

D, 21, 6-3, 184
Bakersfield (AHL)
21–1–1–2–28
2021 draft, 212th overall

Stay-at-home defender. Sidelined in December after taking a puck to the head.

10 SHANE LACHANCE

LW, 21, 6-5, 218
Boston University (HE)
29–9–15–24–24
2021 draft, 186th overall

A big man with good hands. The Terriers captain excels at the net front.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

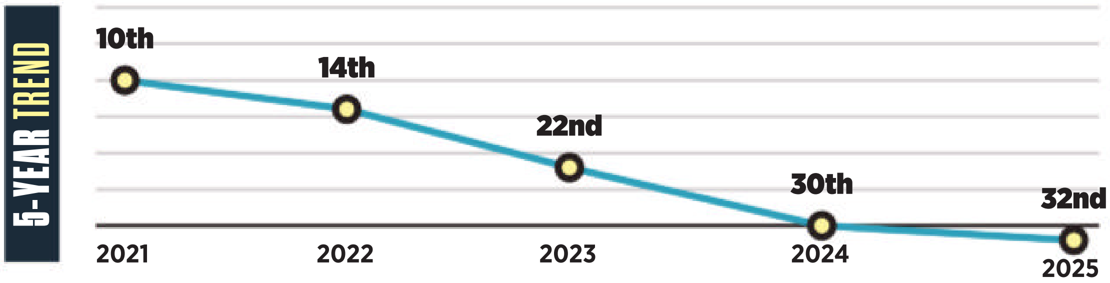
PHOTO BY BAKERSFIELD CONDORS

D+ | RANK: 32ND

FLORIDA PANTHERS

JUSTIN
SOURDIF

THE PANTHERS HAVEN'T SELECTED in the first round since 2021, and they don't have a 2025 first-rounder, either, as they've traded away many picks in pursuit of the Stanley Cup – which they captured in 2024. With picks being moved to acquire the likes of Matthew Tkachuk, Sam Reinhart, Vladimir Tarasenko and Claude Giroux, Florida has had to look deeper in the draft to fill its prospect pool. The Panthers have seen a few late-round selections and undrafted free agents play in NHL games already, and they hope to see more of them take on impactful roles as they look to pull out all the stops to win a second Cup. **BY COLBY GUY**



1

LINUS ERIKSSON

C, 18, 6-0, 183
Timra (Swe.)
9-0-0-0-2
2024 draft, 58th overall

OVERALL 83

After standout performances at the U-18 worlds and in Sweden's second division, Eriksson has earned bigger chances. He made his way onto Sweden's WJC team – scoring two goals with fourth-line minutes – and has arrived at the country's top pro level. "He's had a solid year," said director of player personnel Bryan McCabe. "He started slow, hurt his knee, and now, he's been promoted. He's got good sense, good hockey IQ. He just needs to keep improving on his pace and strength."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

2

JUSTIN SOURDIF

RW, 22, 5-11, 175
Charlotte (AHL)
27-11-11-22-50
2020 draft, 87th overall

Sourdif played three NHL games early in the 2023-24 season – and he impressed enough to get a prime opportunity in training camp this year. But an early injury soured that opportunity, and he has been playing top-six AHL minutes for the Checkers this season. "He's very competitive along the walls and down low, and he's really shifty," McCabe said. "The biggest thing for him is health and just being able to stay in the lineup." Sourdif's pace and physical style has him suited as a bottom-six forward.

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

3

MATVEI SHURAVIN

D, 18, 6-4, 218
K.A. Moscow Jr. (Rus.)
33-3-16-19-4
2024 draft, 97th overall

After being drafted in the third round in 2024, Shuravin earned the alternate captaincy for his junior squad and has excelled in most situations this season. He has even earned a call-up to the second-tier VHL squad. "He's a solid two-way defender," McCabe said. "He can kind of play the game any way he wants. He's physical. He can move the puck. He's got some decent mitts on the offensive blueline and on the power play. He's had a solid year. He's been moving up the ranks. He's a solid prospect moving forward."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

4

GRACYN SAWCHYN

C, 20, 5-11, 155
Edmonton (WHL)
40-23-37-60-56
2023 draft, 63rd overall

Sawchyn has shown the Panthers in two separate training camps that he plays heavier than his size, and he's applied that in the WHL. He's a solid forechecker and a shifty playmaker with a good shot. "He's had such a great season," McCabe said. "He's put up some serious numbers in the WHL. His consistency has been much better. The biggest thing for him is to keep adding strength. The more muscular he can get to be able to battle against men as he moves up the ranks, it's going to help him."

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2027-28

5

JACK DEVINE

RW, 21, 5-11, 180
Denver (NCHC)
30-8-33-41-22
2022 draft, 221st overall

After finishing fourth in the nation in goal-scoring in 2023-24, Devine has taken on the role of leader and playmaker this year. As a result, he has become one of the NCAA's most complete players while still sitting among the nation's leaders in points. And he has done a lot of winning too. "He's obviously trying to chase his third national championship in four years, which is pretty special," McCabe said. "He's taken a bit of a more distributor role. For him, moving forward, he's trying to get quicker, faster and stronger."

FW24 | No. 6 **NHL** | 2026-27

6

SIMON ZETHER

C, 19, 6-3, 186
Vasteras (Swe.2)
22-3-6-9-8
2024 draft, 129th overall

Smart pivot with big frame who can play in all situations. Solid in defensive zone.

7

STEPAN GORBUNOV

C, 18, 6-5, 196
Chelyabinsk (Rus.2)
39-11-11-22-16
2024 draft, 169th overall

Towering center with high hockey IQ. Has also played 'D.' Skates well for big man.

8

MAREK ALSCHER

D, 20, 6-3, 196
Charlotte (AHL)
32-2-5-7-23
2022 draft, 93rd overall

Assertive shutdown defenseman who plays well in transition. First-year pro.

9

HUNTER ST. MARTIN

LW, 19, 6-2, 185
Medicine Hat (WHL)
53-33-16-49-46
2024 draft, 193rd overall

Speedy sniper who plays heavier than his size. Passed over in 2023 draft.

10

KIRILL GERASIMYUK

G, 21, 6-2, 178
Khanty-Mansiysk (Rus.2)
9-7-8, 2.16, .924
2021 draft, 152nd overall

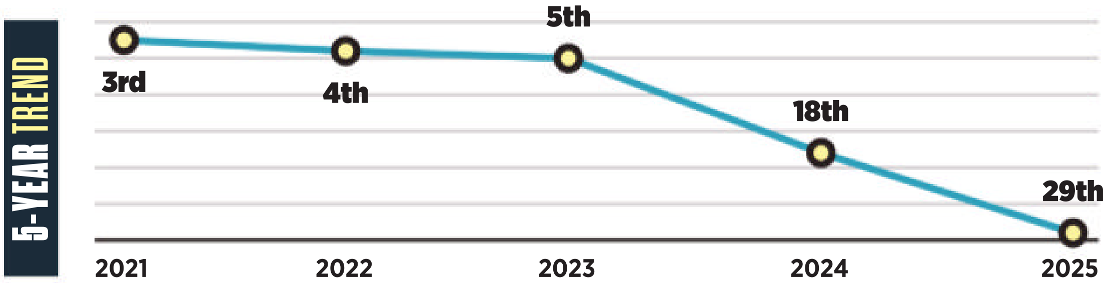
Structured, athletic goalie with good positioning. Showing well in first full pro year.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

PHOTO BY CHARLOTTE CHECKERS

LOS ANGELES
KINGS

THE KINGS HAVE developed skaters Quinton Byfield, Adrian Kempe and Brandt Clarke, integrating them into the team's culture of unrelenting hard work and stifling 'D.' But in goal, Jonathan Quick still casts a long shadow. Since Quick led the Kings to a pair of Stanley Cups, grooming the next elite goalie has been a pipe dream. Rob Blake and Luc Robitaille, who make up the brain trust, have taken a proactive approach, creating a dedicated goaltending department under Bill Ranford's direction in 2023. Developing keepers is now a priority, and, not coincidentally, three of L.A.'s top five prospects are goalies. **BY DOUG WARD**



LIAM
GREENTREE

1
LIAM GREENTREE

RW, 19, 6-3, 216
Windsor (OHL)
52–37–54–91–43
2024 draft, 26th overall

Greentree was impressive in the Kings' rookie challenge, showcasing an accurate shot with a quick release. "He has the complete toolbox," said assistant GM Nelson Emerson. "Size, speed and scoring." Named captain of the Spitfires at 18 last season, Greentree has proven to be a natural leader on and off the ice. He's been one of the OHL's most consistent offensive players, leading Windsor in scoring this season and last. He has the size and strength to develop into an impact NHLer.

OVERALL 47

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

2
ERIK PORTILLO

G, 24, 6-6, 210
Ontario (AHL)
14-5-3, 2.86, .888
Trade (Buf), March 1, 2023

Portillo is a big, rangy goalie who uses his 6-foot-6 frame to his advantage. The Kings want Portillo to become less freewheeling as action in the crease gets frantic. "He makes great saves because he is so acrobatic," Emerson said. "We would like to see him shorten his game, settle in a little bit." He got his first taste of NHL play when he was called up in November, making 28 saves in a 2-1 win over Anaheim. Portillo is on the verge of earning a full-time roster spot but still has room to develop a more consistent game.

FW24 | nr **NHL** | 2025-26

3
CARTER GEORGE

G, 18, 6-1, 190
Owen Sound (OHL)
9-18-6, 3.47, .904
2024 draft, 57th overall

When George was selected in the second round last summer, he became the highest-drafted goalie by the Kings since Christopher Gibson (49th in 2011). George handles the puck well, and his athleticism allows him to play bigger than his size. He recorded two shutouts with a tournament-best 1.76 goals-against average for Canada at the 2025 WJC. He grew up as a big Kings fan and admired Quick. Now, he might be the long-term successor to his boyhood hero. "He raises his game at every level," Emerson said.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2029-30

4
SAMUEL FAGEMO

LW, 24, 6-0, 200
Ontario (AHL)
44–21–9–30–26
Waivers (Nsh), Nov. 11, 2023

As Fagemo approaches his 25th birthday, the Kings still believe the Swedish winger's high motor and hockey IQ can work at the NHL level. "He is the best scorer in the AHL," Emerson said. With a quick release and big one-timer, Fagemo is undeniably skilled. Initially drafted by the Kings in 2019 (50th overall), Fagemo has been a force in the AHL, but in four brief NHL stints totaling 21 games, he has been limited to four points. If he can improve his game in his own end, the Kings believe he will thrive in the NHL.

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2025-26

5
HAMPTON SLUKYNSKY

G, 19, 6-2, 185
Western Michigan (NCHC)
7-4-1, 1.57, .942
2023 draft, 118th overall

Slukynsky grew up a slapshot away from the Canadian border, where he had a storybook senior year at Warroad High School. The lone blemish on his 28-1-1 record was a double-OT loss to Mahtomedi in the Minnesota State Championship game. He then posted a 28-3-0 record in the USHL last season. This year, he helped Team USA take gold at the 2025 WJC, recording two wins. The Kings love his approach, determination and athleticism. He used a pitching machine to perfect his instincts and quickness.

FW24 | nr **NHL** | 2028-29

6
JAKUB DVORAK

D, 19, 6-5, 210
Ontario (AHL)
23-0-4-4-14
2023 draft, 54th overall

Emerson said Dvorak is the "big kid who could become that left 'D' we need."

7
JARED WRIGHT

RW, 22, 6-1, 195
Denver (NCHC)
30-8-4-12-2
2022 draft, 169th overall

Tenacious winger combines work ethic with speed. Emerson: "Works hard every shift."

8
OTTO SALIN

D, 20, 5-11, 187
TPS (Fin.)
44-7-16-23-10
2022 draft, 148th overall

"Size isn't a factor, because he's such a competitor," Emerson said.

9
KENNY CONNORS

C, 21, 6-2, 207
UMass (HE)
30-8-17-25-6
2022 draft, 103rd overall

Strong hockey IQ and work ethic. Needs to improve his quickness and speed.

10
KIRILL KIRSANOV

D, 22, 6-1, 198
Nizhny Novgorod (KHL)
28-2-4-6-6
2021 draft, 84th overall

Upbeat and driven while overcoming injuries. Coached by Hall of Famer Igor Larionov.

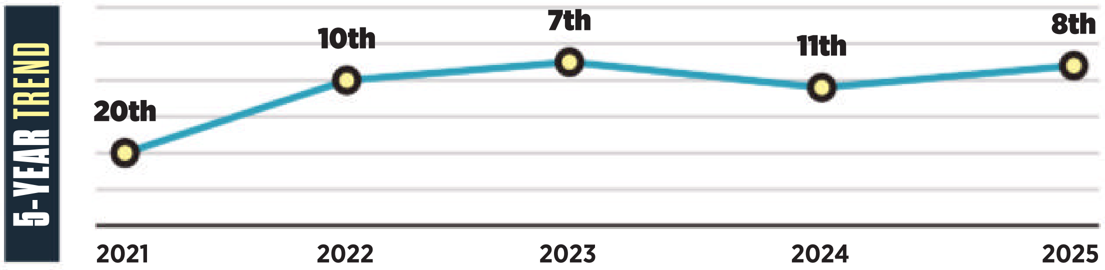
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

REMO AGOSTINO/WINDSOR SPITFIRES

MINNESOTA WILD

THE WILD HAVEN'T CHANGED much over the past few years, with the franchise re-signing many of its players to long-term contracts to solidify a veteran core. But youth is still important in Minnesota. Just look at its prospect pool. From their choices at the draft to an in-season trade that bolstered their future defense, the Wild have been mindful of how their roster will evolve once the cost of the Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts drops significantly after this season – a fresh start that will give the franchise more flexibility to combine the established regime with young up-and-comers. **BY SARAH MCLELLAN**

ZEEV **BUIUM**



1

ZEEV BUIUM

D, 19, 6-0, 186
Denver (NCHC)
28–6–27–33–36
2024 draft, 12th overall

After the Wild traded up one spot to draft Buium, he immediately became their top prospect. Why? Buium won his first of two WJC gold medals as the youngest player on Team USA. He had the first 50-point season by a freshman defenseman in more than 20 years and was the first freshman D-man in Denver history to be named an All-American. Oh, and he won an NCAA title. The smooth-skating playmaker has become a more patient defender, and that'll help his transition to the NHL.

OVERALL 4

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

2

DAVID JIRICEK

D, 21, 6-4, 204
Iowa (AHL)
24–2–6–8–17
Trade (Clb), Nov. 30, 2024

Jiricek has arrived as advertised. Since a trade from the Blue Jackets, who received four draft picks – including a first-rounder – and a prospect from the Wild, Jiricek previewed the unique skills that made him the No. 6 pick in 2022 during a stint with the Wild while their blueline was decimated by injuries. Jiricek has impressive offensive instincts and a lengthy reach. His defensive game needs work, but he's willing to battle in his own zone, including in front of the net and in corners.

OVERALL 25

FW24 | NHL **NHL** | 2025-26

3

JESPER WALLSTEDT

G, 22, 6-3, 213
Iowa (AHL)
6-9-2, 3.77, .876
2021 draft, 20th overall

This season could have gone very differently for Wallstedt. After a strong training camp, he remained with the Wild as the team intended to juggle three goalies. But a rash of injuries and limited cap space resulted in Wallstedt being sent to the minors, a change of plans that affected his mindset. He struggled on the ice, and he described the situation as an all-time low. He talked with sports psychologists and went to basics to reset his game, which is based on his textbook technique.

OVERALL 37

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2025-26

4

DANILA YUROV

RW, 21, 6-1, 178
Magnitogorsk (KHL)
46–13–12–25–10
2022 draft, 24th overall

Off-season surgery delayed Yurov's start this year, and it took him time to get back up to speed. But the power forward who makes an impact all over the ice has resurfaced, and Yurov's calling card hasn't changed. He's known for his speed, smarts and battle. Those traits were clear when he had 21 goals in 62 KHL games last year, plus another six in the playoffs. What's also shining through is his ability to continually be in the right spot, not just in the offensive zone but also when defending.

OVERALL 50

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

5

LIAM OHGREN

LW, 21, 6-0, 187
Iowa (AHL)
25–12–11–23–6
2022 draft, 19th overall

What a difference confidence makes. Ohgren stuck in the NHL out of camp after making his big-league debut last season but wasn't a factor once the games began. His ice time dropped, and he was sent to Iowa. There, he thrived, rediscovering his offense and playing in all situations. This maturity followed him back to the NHL when he was promoted in January. He's flashed his speed and has been effective on the forecheck. Staying consistent is his challenge.

OVERALL 59

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2025-26

6

CHARLIE STRAMEL

C, 20, 6-3, 210
Michigan State (Big Ten)
30–9–15–24–20
2023 draft, 21st overall

Leveraging his size during a breakout junior season after transferring from Wisconsin.

7

RILEY HEIDT

C, 19, 5-11, 177
Prince George (WHL)
45–26–41–67–31
2023 draft, 64th overall

Playmaker who can also score. Great anticipation skills. Very solid for his size.

8

RYDER RITCHIE

RW, 18, 6-1, 185
Medicine Hat (WHL)
41–21–23–44–21
2024 draft, 45th overall

Great instincts with the puck on his stick. Needs to improve consistency, defense.

9

CARSON LAMBOS

D, 22, 6-1, 193
Iowa (AHL)
43–4–6–10–21
2021 draft, 26th overall

Offense is secondary for Lambos, who focuses on clearing pucks up the ice.

10

HUNTER HAIGHT

C, 20, 5-11, 181
Iowa (AHL)
44–12–10–22–18
2022 draft, 47th overall

Moves quickly through the neutral zone and doesn't shy away from the physical areas.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

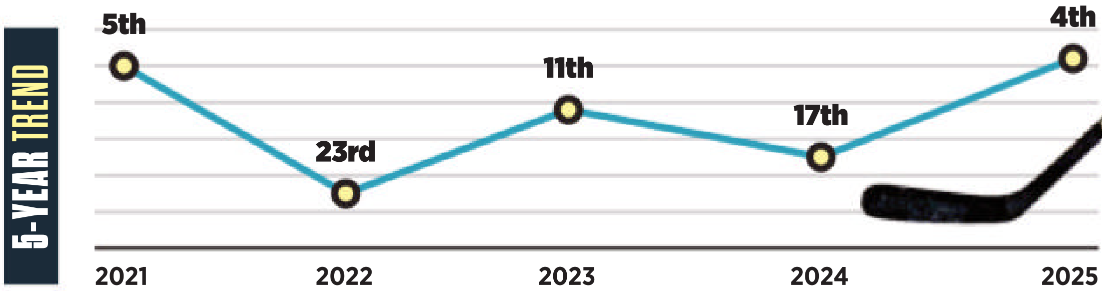
CLARKSON CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY VIA UNIVERSITY OF DENVER ATHLETICS

A- | **RANK: 4TH** NHL

MONTREAL CANADIENS

JEFF GORTON HAD A lot on his plate when he took over as the Canadiens' executive vice-president of hockey operations after the team fired former GM Marc Bergevin in November 2021. One of Gorton's biggest jobs in the rebuilding project he was given by owner and president Geoff Molson was to improve drafting and development with the goal of building a team that could be a Stanley Cup contender for several seasons. Gorton and now-GM Kent Hughes have done a very impressive job in that respect, and there is now hope for the future in Montreal with several top prospects in the system. **BY STU COWAN**

5-YEAR TREND



DAVID
REINBACHER

1

IVAN DEMIDOV

RW, 19, 6-1, 192
St. Petersburg (KHL)
56–19–29–48–18
2024 draft, 5th overall

OVERALL 1

Demidov is the prospect the Habs are most excited about – and with good reason because of his sublime offensive talent. After Demidov was getting limited ice time early this season in the KHL, Hughes went to Russia in December to meet with him and coach Roman Rotenberg. Demidov's ice time increased and so did his output. Rotenberg said Demidov is stronger this year and winning board battles. "He has genes to be like (Kirill) Kaprizov," Rotenberg said. "He has genes to be strong."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

2

DAVID REINBACHER

D, 20, 6-3, 209
Laval (AHL)
injured, has not played
2023 draft, 5th overall

OVERALL 17

It looked like this might be a lost season for Reinbacher when he sustained a knee injury during the pre-season. After surgery on his left knee Oct. 1, the Habs said they expected him to be out for up to six months. But in late January, he practised with the Habs in a non-contact jersey, meaning he should see action with AHL Laval if not Montreal. The jury is out on whether he'll be the big right-shot D-man the Habs hope he will be after a disappointing 2023-24 season in Switzerland.

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2026-27

3

MICHAEL HAGE

C, 18, 6-1, 190
Michigan (Big Ten)
29–13–19–32–21
2024 draft, 21st overall

OVERALL 42

"Smooth" is the best word to describe Hage on the ice. He has an elite skill set, a great shot release and plays with confidence. He must gain strength to play in the NHL, which is why it was a good idea for him to go to NCAA Michigan, where he'll have time to hit the weight room. Hage said he wants to become more explosive on the ice. He grew up a Canadiens fan and has a strong connection to Montreal, which is where both his parents were raised. He also speaks great French.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

4

LOGAN MAILLOUX

D, 21, 6-3, 212
Laval (AHL)
38–9–13–22–54
2021 draft, 31st overall

OVERALL 58

After making Mailloux one of the final cuts in camp, coach Martin St-Louis said he's confident Mailloux will play many years in the NHL. But St-Louis added the best thing for him was to spend a second year in the AHL. Montreal wants Mailloux to focus on defense. That's partly why Laval coach Pascal Vincent took him off the power play in December. "The power play isn't what's going to get him to the NHL," Vincent said. "We want him to become a player coaches can trust all over the ice."

FW24 | No. 6 **NHL** | 2025-26

5

JACOB FOWLER

G, 20, 6-2, 225
Boston College (HE)
20-5-1, 1.71, .936
2023 draft, 69th overall

OVERALL 63

Fowler has a good mix of confidence and cockiness, which will help in the spotlight that comes with being a goalie in Montreal. He's also very talented and has improved his fitness. Scotty Bowman, who watches a lot of NCAA hockey, loves the way Fowler tracks the puck. BC goalie coach Mike Ayers says Fowler has worked on his stance and overall presence in the net to maximize his size. His combination of natural ability and efficiency in his game should lead to success at the next level.

FW24 | No. 7 **NHL** | 2028-29

6

OWEN BECK

C, 21, 6-0, 199
Laval (AHL)
43–13–16–29–26
2022 draft, 33rd overall

Intelligent pivot who's strong on faceoffs and responsible in all three zones.

7

ADAM ENGSTROM

D, 21, 6-2, 198
Laval (AHL)
45–4–17–21–24
2022 draft, 92nd overall

Mobility and skating are exceptional, but he needs to improve his defensive play.

8

JAKUB DOBES

G, 23, 6-5, 215
Laval (AHL)
9-3-1, 2.44, .910
2020 draft, 136th overall

Made most of opportunity when called up by Canadiens, winning his first five games.

9

JOSHUA ROY

RW, 21, 6-0, 192
Laval (AHL)
37–14–15–29–4
2021 draft, 150th overall

Heady player must improve compete level and consistency. Saw 23 NHL games last year.

10

FILIP MESAR

RW, 21, 5-10, 184
Laval (AHL)
25–2–7–9–16
2022 draft, 26th overall

Can create offense with speed and skill but needs to improve defensive-zone play.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | JURAJ SLAFKOVSKY, LW, 20; LANE HUTSON, D, 21

MATT GARIES/LAVAL ROCKET

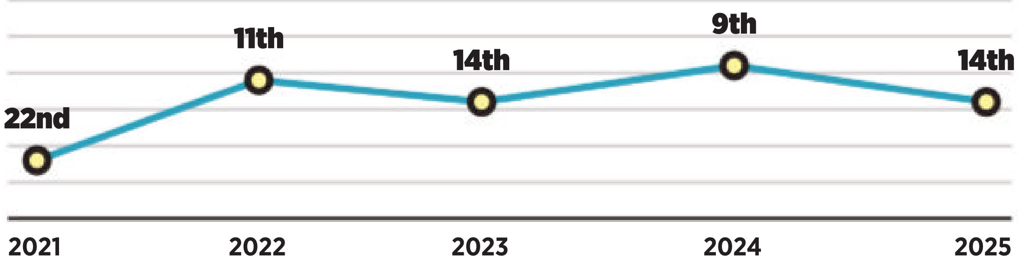
NHL | B | RANK: 14TH

NASHVILLE PREDATORS

TANNER
MOLENDYK

WHEN GM BARRY TROTZ made a big splash in the early days of free agency last July, he opted against undertaking a youth movement. In the months that followed, he cleared out three players drafted in the first round, beginning with the trade that sent prospect goalie Yaroslav Askarov (11th overall in 2020) to San Jose. After that came the decisions to place defenseman Dante Fabbro (17th in ’16) on waivers – where he was claimed by Columbus – and trade center Philip Tomasino (24th in ’19) to Pittsburgh. Opportunity now abounds for those who can show they’re ready. **BY DAVID BOCLAIR**

5-YEAR TREND



1
TANNER MOLENDYK
D, 20, 6-0, 181
Medicine Hat (WHL)
37–6–29–35–14
2023 draft, 24th overall

Molendyk made Nashville brass think long and hard during training camp before they returned him to major junior. Since then, he was one of Team Canada’s best players at the WJC and was traded from Saskatoon to Medicine Hat, which likely portends a deep playoff run. His skating and transition skills make him a fit for today’s game and, in a best-case scenario, the heir apparent to Roman Josi. Expect him to get into some pro games if the Tigers are eliminated early enough.

OVERALL 36

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

2
DAVID EDSTROM
C, 20, 6-3, 185
Frolunda (Swe.)
31–5–10–15–8
Trade (SJ), Aug. 23, 2024

Assistant GM Jeff Kealty describes Edstrom as “a very resourceful player” based on his ability to adjust to various linemates and to play in all situations. He was the No. 1 center for Sweden at the WJC, where he showed off the well-rounded game that has served him well in his country’s top league. Good habits plus consistent effort and performance rather than elite skill are what lead to results for Edstrom, which is precisely the type of player Trotz coveted when he coached the expansion Preds.

OVERALL 49

FW24 | 1 (Veg) **NHL** | 2026-27

3
FEDOR SVECHKOV
C, 21, 6-0, 206
Milwaukee (AHL)
13–5–7–12–10
2021 draft, 19th overall

Svechkov played his first nine NHL games starting in November before being returned to the AHL. Less than a month later, he was back in the NHL – this time for an extended stay – and in mid-January, he put together a three-game goal streak, including a game-winner. While he is still green, more often than not, he has displayed the well-rounded, reliable approach he showed off in the KHL and last season with Milwaukee. He’ll factor heavily into an off-season overhaul.

OVERALL 51

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2025-26

4
JOAKIM KEMELL
RW, 20, 5-11, 191
Milwaukee (AHL)
41–9–17–26–29
2022 draft, 17th overall

Having come to North America late in 2022-23, Kemell already has more than 130 games of pro experience at a young age. Then in February, he had a notable NHL debut (seven shots) during a two-game stint with Nashville. That followed an appearance in the AHL All-Star Game. He delivered a five-point night, including a hat trick, early in the AHL season. With his above-average competitiveness and accurate shot, Kemell will get an extended NHL run late this season.

OVERALL 57

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2026-27

5
EGOR SURIN
C, 18, 6-2, 197
Yaroslavl (KHL)
31–5–2–7–16
2024 draft, 22nd overall

Surin’s ice time from night to night in the KHL has been inconsistent, but his presence in Russia’s top league has been almost a constant. That’s because when he has played at the junior level, he has dominated to the tune of well over a point per game. His blend of high-end skill and battle level has some in Nashville envisioning him as a linemate with Zach L’Heureux in the not-too-distant future. But he still has one season remaining on his current KHL deal, so he won’t arrive in North America until 2026.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

6
MATTHEW WOOD
RW, 20, 6-4, 205
Minnesota (Big Ten)
31–11–20–31–14
2023 draft, 15th overall

Heavy shot lets him score from anywhere. Needs to harness formidable frame.

7
REID SCHAEFER
LW, 21, 6-4, 220
Milwaukee (AHL)
19–8–6–14–27
Trade (Edm), Feb. 28, 2023

Topped last season’s goal total in 19 games before a season-ending shoulder injury.

8
ANDREW GIBSON
D, 20, 6-4, 210
Oshawa (OHL)
41–7–10–17–53
Trade (Det), June 25, 2024

Paired with Molendyk at world juniors in a possible preview of future NHL duo.

9
TEDDY STIGA
C, 18, 5-10, 179
Boston College (HE)
29–10–14–24–22
2024 draft, 55th overall

Scored overtime-winner in WJC gold-medal game. Great start as BC freshman.

10
RYAN UFKO
D, 21, 5-10, 178
Milwaukee (AHL)
48–5–12–17–8
2021 draft, 115th overall

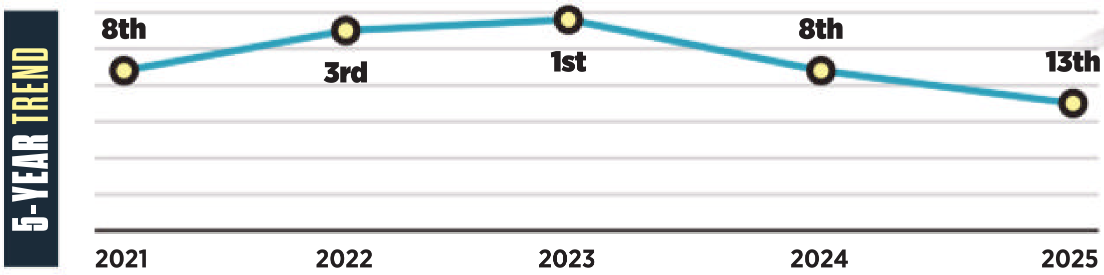
Started slowly but settled in nicely in first full pro season. Former captain at UMass.

RANDY FEERE/MEDICINE HAT TIGERS

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | ZACH L’HEUREUX, LW, 21

NEW JERSEY DEVILS

WITH HIS CORE GROUP of forwards firmly in place and locked up long term, New Jersey Devils GM Tom Fitzgerald went out last summer and remodelled his D-corps and goaltending – and hired a new coach – with an eye on immediate contention. That doesn't leave much room for prospects. It didn't even leave room for players who thought they were full-time NHLers, only to become prospects again and face the task of working their way back to the bigs. When it comes to the future, the Devils are focused primarily on their own end. And, generally speaking, the bigger the prospect, the better. **BY KEN CAMPBELL**



SIMON **NEMEC**

1 SIMON NEMEC

D, 21, 6-1, 190
Utica (AHL)
34–5–18–23–12
2022 draft, 2nd overall

OVERALL 14

Nemec played 60 NHL games last year but found himself back in the 'A' after the summertime additions of Brett Pesce, Brenden Dillon and Johnathan Kovacevic. The Devils would likely admit Nemec was rushed into the NHL at 19, and the AHL stint can be a bit of a reset. "He's really started to embrace what we want to see from him and what he does at an elite level, which is that transitional style," said Devils assistant GM Dan MacKinnon. "At times, he can be a one-man breakout."

FW24 | NHL **NHL** | 2025-26

2 ANTON SILAYEV

D, 18, 6-7, 211
Nizhny Novgorod (KHL)
51–1–10–11–30
2024 draft, 10th overall

OVERALL 24

Silayev is under KHL contract through next season, and the Devils would like to bring him into the organization late in 2025-26 to get him into some AHL games. "His best asset is his mobility," MacKinnon said. "He skates well for a big man, and he handles the puck fine. We're not looking for him to be an offensive defenseman." In the past couple years, the Devils have gone from one of the smallest D-corps in the NHL to one of the biggest, and Silayev fits in with that philosophy.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

3 SEAMUS CASEY

D, 21, 5-9, 162
Utica (AHL)
21–3–12–15–6
2022 draft, 46th overall

OVERALL 95

If things work out, Casey could be the second coming of Brian Rafalski. When the Devils had injuries to Pesce and Luke Hughes, Casey found himself on the opening-night roster and showed exceptionally well. After putting up outstanding numbers at the University of Michigan, he's now learning to play a more complete game, though defending will always be challenging at his size. An injury that led to surgery on his hand was a minor setback, but he's logging huge minutes in Utica when he's healthy.

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

4 MIKHAIL YEGOROV

G, 18, 6-5, 180
Boston University (HE)
4-3-0, 1.67, .944
2024 draft, 49th overall

OVERALL 96

After a season-and-a-half stint with a struggling USHL Omaha team, Yegorov joined BU for the second half of the season. His stats with the Lancers didn't leap off the page, but he faced a lot of shots and held up well. He has the size to compete in the NHL, but he has a lot of filling out to do before he faces NHL shooters. That will not be in the short term, and he will work extensively to refine his game with Devils goalie-development coach Manny Legace over the next few years.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2029-30

5 LENNI HAMEENAHO

RW, 20, 6-0, 173
Assat (Fin.)
48–17–25–42–24
2023 draft, 58th overall

Hameenaho is exactly what the Devils could use more of: an NHL-caliber winger with size. Hameenaho has played a full-time role in the Liiga since he was 17 and has put up impressive offensive stats the past two seasons. The Devils hope he can come over and get some games in with Utica late this campaign after the Liiga season ends. "He has the ability to score and handle the puck, and he's not afraid to get inside," MacKinnon said. "We think he has the stature that gives him the potential to do that at the next level."

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2026-27

6 ARSENI GRITSYUK

RW, 23, 5-11, 174
St. Petersburg (KHL)
44–16–21–37–12
2019 draft, 129th overall

KHL's rookie of the year in 2021-22 will contend for an NHL spot next season.

7 JAKUB MALEK

G, 22, 6-4, 170
Ilves (Fin.)
13-9-5, 2.10, .911
2021 draft, 100th overall

Already signed by the Devils and ready to make the move to North America.

8 NICO DAWS

G, 24, 6-4, 203
Utica (AHL)
5-15-1, 3.43, .889
2020 draft, 84th overall

Twenty-plus games at NHL level in two previous seasons, but back in AHL for a reset.

9 CHASE STILLMAN

RW, 21, 6-1, 185
Utica (AHL)
39–3–6–9–20
2021 draft, 29th overall

Devils trying to get former scorer to embrace bottom-six NHL role.

10 HERMAN TRAFF

RW, 19, 6-3, 203
HV71 (Swe.)
21–3–4–7–27
2024 draft, 91st overall

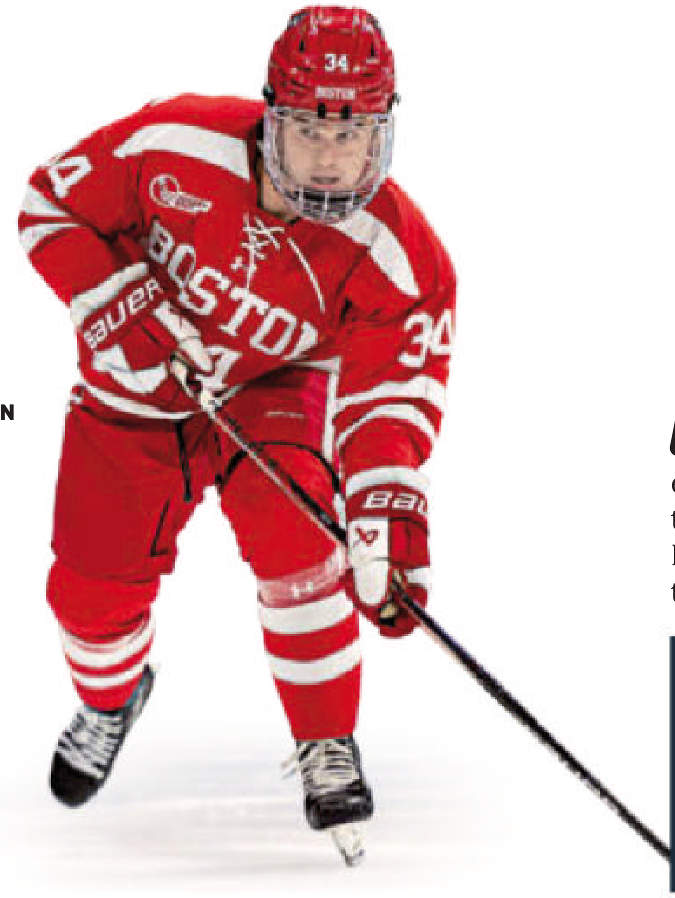
Big-bodied winger goes to the net and has some offensive skill.

KYLE MARTINO/UTICA COMETS

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | LUKE HUGHES, D, 21

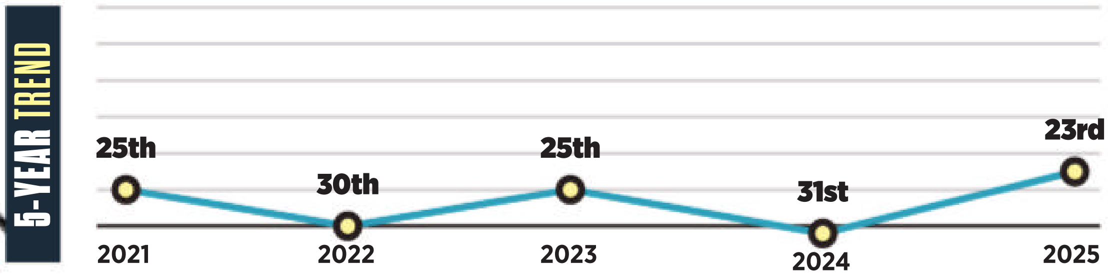
NHL | C+ | RANK: 23RD

NEW YORK ISLANDERS



COLE
EISERMAN

A SEASON THAT STARTED WITH high hopes left the Islanders fighting for a playoff spot. But on a positive note, Chris Lamoriello, the Isles' assistant GM as well as GM of their AHL affiliate in Bridgeport, believes the team's prospect pool is the strongest it's been because of the number of players active at a high level outside of Long Island or the AHL. "We want to make sure they're succeeding on and off the ice where they are before we consider next steps," Lamoriello said. "You're allowed to provide some more patience to make sure any transition period is as manageable as possible." **BY MATT CAPUTO**



1

COLE EISERMAN

LW, 18, 6-0, 200
Boston University (HE)
28–16–8–24–27
2024 draft, 20th overall

OVERALL 38

When the Isles chose Eiserman in 2024, it was their first time picking in Round 1 since 2019. He's a gifted scorer and skater who plays with hunger around the net. Eiserman produced at a point-per-game pace at this year's world juniors, and he's continued that level of production in the NCAA. Armed with an accurate shot and strong passing ability, Eiserman was considered the best goal-scorer in last year's draft class. "He fits the profile of a goal-scorer," Lamoriello said.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

2

DANNY NELSON

C, 19, 6-2, 215
Notre Dame (Big Ten)
28–11–9–20–29
2023 draft, 49th overall

OVERALL 64

Nelson saw action in a variety of situations for Team USA on their way to back-to-back WJC golds in 2024 and 2025. Using his size and net-front poise to his advantage, Nelson is willing to battle along the boards and behind the net. He's also hard on the forecheck and consistently produces offense. Nelson is playing with confidence for the Irish after missing the end of last season with injury. There's hope his grit down the middle will translate into a similar role on Long Island.

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2028-29

3

MARCUS GIDLOF

G, 19, 6-6, 212
Leksand (Swe.)
9-4-0, 2.19, .912
2024 draft, 147th overall

OVERALL 98

Considered perhaps the best goalie and biggest sleeper of the 2024 draft, Gidlof is large and mobile. He got two starts at the 2025 world juniors, stopping 30 of 32 shots in the bronze-medal game. He takes up a lot of space in the net, and he's good at managing his crease and playing pucks behind the goal. While he's not projected to be an NHL starter, at 19, he has plenty of time to earn a shot. "He's in a good position to grow," Lamoriello said. "He's right where he hoped he would be."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2029-30

4

JESSE PULKKINEN

D, 20, 6-6, 203
JYP (Fin.)
29–3–3–6–18
2024 draft, 54th overall

Lamoriello describes the towering Pulkkinen as a "large, mobile and athletic defenseman with good puck skills." Pulkkinen is proving himself to be a creative and assertive puck-mover while seeing a lot of ice time in Finland's top league. Pulkkinen matches his high-level skating skills with a willingness to use his physical presence to win on-ice battles. Although Pulkkinen missed the Isles' big-league training camp due to injury, there's reason to believe he'll have a shot at playing on Long Island in the years to come.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

5

QUINN FINLEY

LW, 20, 6-0, 187
Wisconsin (Big Ten)
32–19–15–34–31
2022 draft, 78th overall

Blessed with great speed and an elite shot, Finley is enjoying a breakout year as an NCAA sophomore. His instincts, explosiveness and clever cycle play make him a dangerous option in the offensive zone. He's scored several impressive goals while averaging more than a point per game this season. He's also added strength and improved the details of his game. There's hope he'll soon be ready for the NHL. "He's having success on the scoresheet," Lamoriello said. "His confidence is building."

FW24 | No. 7 **NHL** | 2027-28

6

CALLE ODELIUS

D, 20, 6-0, 192
Bridgeport (AHL)
45–0–10–10–18
2022 draft, 65th overall

Injured most of last season, the mobile two-way defender is now seeing a lot of ice time.

7

WILLIAM DUFOUR

RW, 23, 6-3, 212
Bridgeport (AHL)
39–7–7–14–43
2020 draft, 152nd overall

In Year 3 as a pro, he has yet to deliver the consistent scoring he flashed in junior.

8

KAMIL BEDNARIK

C, 18, 6-1, 188
Boston University (HE)
29–1–14–15–24
2024 draft, 61st overall

Playmaking, versatile center is producing in one of NCAA's toughest conferences.

9

CAMERON BERG

C, 23, 6-0, 205
North Dakota (NCHC)
17–9–7–16–12
2021 draft, 125th overall

Speedy, dynamic pivot goes hard on the forecheck and to front of the net.

10

MATTHEW MAGGIO

RW, 22, 5-11, 187
Bridgeport (AHL)
44–6–9–15–20
2022 draft, 142nd overall

Started season with more confidence, but he's still adjusting to pro game in Year 2.

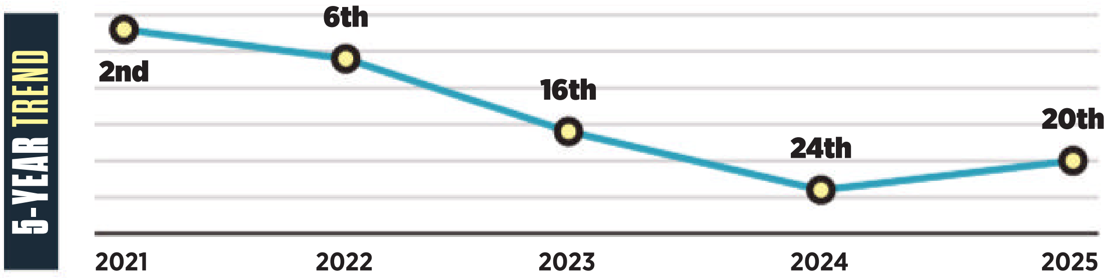
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | ISAIAH GEORGE, D, 21

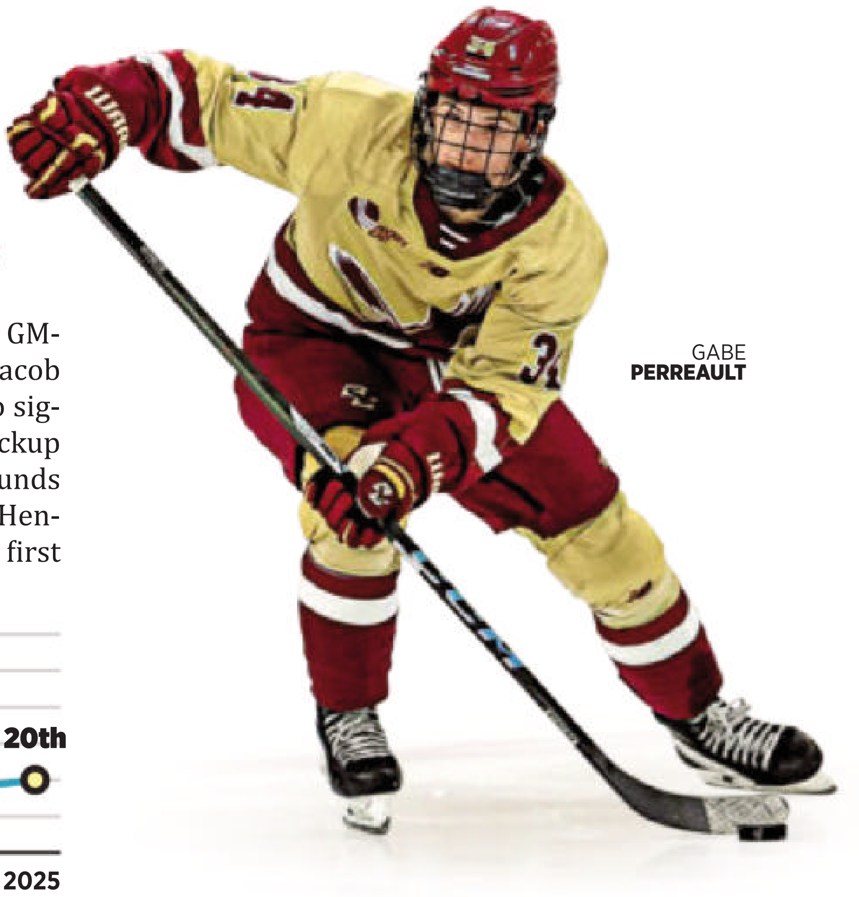
MIKE LAST/BOSTON UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS

B- | RANK: 20TH **NHL**

NEW YORK RANGERS

CALL IT BROADWAY DRAMA. A tight salary cap prompted Rangers GM-president Chris Drury to move veteran Barclay Goodrow and captain Jacob Trouba, leading to a dismal stretch beginning in late November. It also signalled a team ready to retool with young contributors, including a backup for Igor Shesterkin. Since 2015, many Rangers prospects from the first three rounds – including Lias Andersson, Vitali Kravtsov, Sean Day, Olof Lindbom and Karl Henriksson – have failed to stick. New York's current top six prospects are from the first three rounds. Can the organization develop them? **BY STEVE ZIPAY**




GABE
PERREAULT

1
GABE PERREAULT

RW, 19, 5-11, 178
Boston College (HE)
29–12–27–39–8
2023 draft, 23rd overall

A skilled playmaker whose skating has improved, Perreault was a key factor (three goals, 10 points in seven games) in Team USA's WJC gold. Born in Canada and raised in Illinois, Perreault has been compared by analysts to Montreal's Cole Caufield in style, vision and hockey IQ. The Rangers have high hopes, but Perreault will have to add muscle – similar to his father, former NHLer Yanic, who scored 20-plus goals seven times – and raise his defensive game, to blossom.

OVERALL 19

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2025-26

2
BRENNAN OTHMANN

LW, 22, 6-0, 186
Hartford (AHL)
25–12–7–19–35
2021 draft, 16th overall

It wasn't the start to his second AHL season Othmann had hoped for. After being sent to Hartford following big-league training camp – where he had four points in six pre-season games – Othmann suffered an upper-body injury in his third AHL game, sidelining him for two months. He had to hit the reset button upon returning but got rolling in late January. Othmann brings toughness, a north-south style and a quick release. He's striving to upgrade his skating and defense.

OVERALL 45

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

3
EJ EMERY

D, 18, 6-3, 180
North Dakota (NCHC)
29–0–1–1–34
2024 draft, 30th overall

An athletic blueliner with a big frame, long reach and high-end skating who can close gaps and hunt down attackers, Emery was tapped by many as the top defensive D-man in last year's draft. As far as offensive production, though, he projects as a No. 4-5 defender and penalty-killer, not a power-play QB. Emery, who has polished his game at USA Hockey's National Team Development Program, wants to emulate K'Andre Miller, but he hasn't produced enough to predict a match to Miller's career.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

4
DREW FORTESCUE

D, 19, 6-2, 180
Boston College (HE)
28–0–9–9–40
2023 draft, 90th overall

Another promising youngster from the Team USA group who won WJC gold, Fortescue is growing as a shutdown defenseman, which the Rangers brass certainly values. He was raised in Pearl River, N.Y., not far north of Manhattan, and therefore knows the three-team Metropolitan area hockey landscape and fandom, which can certainly be a plus. With good speed for his size, Fortescue makes quick decisions, creates zone exits in the transition game and uses his stick well to disrupt passing and shooting lanes.

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2027-28

5
ADAM SYKORA

LW, 20, 5-10, 179
Hartford (AHL)
48–8–13–21–6
2022 draft, 63rd overall

Sykora is a two-way winger who brings intensity, purpose and relentless forechecking. Just past the midpoint of the 2024-25 season, his second year in the AHL, Sykora had matched his eight-goal total from 2023-24 and had collected 20 points in 40 games. Interestingly, his tenacious play hasn't led to many penalties, and he creates room for shots on goal, as he's one of Hartford's leaders in that category. His upside? Think of a more offensive Jesper Fast, a dedicated hardworking guy who's ready to go every night.

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

6
BRYCE McCONNELL-BARKER

C, 20, 6-2, 194
Hartford (AHL)
45–5–5–10–20
2022 draft, 97th overall

Limited production as AHL rookie, but ex-Soo captain has time to adjust to pro style.

7
BRETT BERARD

LW, 22, 5-9, 165
Hartford (AHL)
27–9–14–23–41
2020 draft, 134th overall

Undersized but has legit motor. Seven points in 19 NHL games to spark bottom six.

8
DYLAN GARAND

G, 22, 6-1, 176
Hartford (AHL)
13–7–5, 2.73, .914
2020 draft, 103rd overall

Goalie named to AHL All-Star Game. Ranks in top 10 in AHL in SP and shutouts.

9
RAOUL BOILARD

C, 19, 6-2, 200
Baie-Comeau (QMJHL)
41–10–24–34–18
2024 draft, 119th overall

Two-way pivot with playmaking upside. Consistent point-per-gamer in the 'Q.'

10
NOAH LABA

C, 21, 6-2, 210
Colorado College (NCHC)
24–8–14–22–19
2022 draft, 111th overall

Another big center, he's a steady and reliable scorer as NCAA junior.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

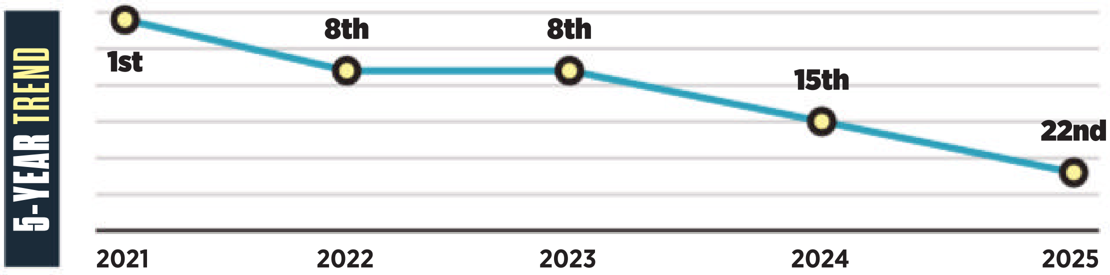
PHOTO BY BOSTON COLLEGE ATHLETICS

NHL | **C+** | **RANK: 22ND**

OTTAWA SENATORS

CARTER **YAKEMCHUK**

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A year makes. The Senators have graduated from underachieving-yet-undeniably-talented underdogs to playoff hopefuls under the watch of GM Steve Staios and coach Travis Green. The team's prospect pipeline is not as hearty as it was at the dawn of the decade, as many of the Sens' youngsters have graduated to become full-fledged NHLers. But the cupboard isn't bare. A pair of young and gifted goalies, multi-talented forwards and a highly touted blueliner with a chip on his shoulder highlight the Senators' developmental system. **BY DILLON COLLINS**



1

CARTER YAKEMCHUK

D, 19, 6-4, 207
Calgary (WHL)
41–15–27–42–59
2024 draft, 7th overall

Yakemchuk shrugged off the disappointment of being returned to junior and being snubbed from Canada's WJC squad by breaking the Hitmen's all-time blueline goal-scoring record. The Sens, who took Yakemchuk ahead of highly touted D-men Zayne Parekh, Anton Silayev and Sam Dickinson, clearly value his blend of size and skill. And while his decision-making and skating must improve, Yakemchuk could well be the Sens' future PP quarterback. He won't be held back for long.

OVERALL 11

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

2

LEEVI MERILAINEN

G, 22, 6-3, 186
Belleville (AHL)
9–3–5, 2.33, .908
2020 draft, 71st overall

When NHL opportunity knocked, Merilainen answered. The Finn shouldered much of the workload when Sens' starter Linus Ullmark was injured in December. Merilainen backstopped the club to seven wins with two shutouts and a sparkling 2.19 goals-against average and .921 save percentage in 11 contests to keep the club in the playoff hunt. He's rangy, cool under pressure and excels with a high workload. Staios told local Ottawa radio TSN 1200, "the moment doesn't seem too big for him." The likely backup next season.

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2025-26

3

STEPHEN HALLIDAY

C, 22, 6-4, 212
Belleville (AHL)
42–14–20–34–21
2022 draft, 104th overall

Halliday made an immediate impact in Belleville after leaving Ohio State at the end of last season. The big center tallied five points in his first 10 pro games, plus another nine in seven playoff contests. This year, he's continued to shine offensively but has been leaky on 'D.' Despite leading Belleville in points as of late January, Halliday had a minus-16 ranking, worst among the team's forwards. But Halliday is a battler. He played four seasons in the USHL before being drafted by the Sens at 20. He'll put in the work.

FW24 | No. 7 **NHL** | 2026-27

4

MADS SOGAARD

G, 24, 6-7, 217
Belleville (AHL)
0-5-2, 3.69, .858
2019 draft, 37th overall

Sogaard, who is tied for being the tallest goalie in NHL history, has been supplanted atop Ottawa's goaltending prospect chart by Merilainen. The giant Dane battled injury and inconsistency in limited samples in both the NHL and AHL this season. In order to stick in the NHL, he must rectify his habits of playing too deep in the net and dropping too early on shots. Still, goalies who are Sogaard's size take time to develop, so he won't be written off. He was sturdy in six playoff games for Belleville last season.

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2026-27

5

XAVIER BOURGAULT

RW, 22, 5-11, 179
Belleville (AHL)
40–5–8–13–6
Trade (Edm), July 15, 2024

Once a highly touted scorer, Bourgault has settled into life as a two-way forward in the pro ranks. Coming over from Edmonton in the summer, Bourgault has taken a hardworking approach to his first season in Belleville. What he lacks in size, he makes up for in on-ice IQ and tenacity. And while his offensive numbers have dwindled as a pro, Bourgault is battle-tested. He won a QMJHL title with Shawinigan in his final junior season, racking up 75 regular-season points and adding another 22 in 16 playoff games.

FW24 | 1 (Edm) **NHL** | 2026-27

6

JORIAN DONOVAN

D, 20, 6-2, 200
Belleville (AHL)
37–0–4–4–49
2022 draft, 136th overall

Mobile, explosive skater is coming off Memorial Cup win with Saginaw. First-year pro.

7

BLAKE MONTGOMERY

LW, 19, 6-4, 195
London (OHL)
35–21–22–43–6
2024 draft, 117th overall

Power forward is a speedy skater and has thrived after moving up from USHL to OHL.

8

LUCAS ELLINAS

LW, 18, 6-1, 186
Kitchener (OHL)
41–18–14–32–36
2024 draft, 104th overall

Hardworking two-way center is an alternate captain in Kitchener as OHL sophomore.

9

GABRIEL ELIASSON

D, 18, 6-7, 214
Barrie (OHL)
47–2–4–6–102
2024 draft, 39th overall

Bruiser won't make waves offensively. First North American season for hulking Swede.

10

HOYT STANLEY

D, 20, 6-3, 203
Cornell (ECAC)
25–1–7–8–31
2023 draft, 108th overall

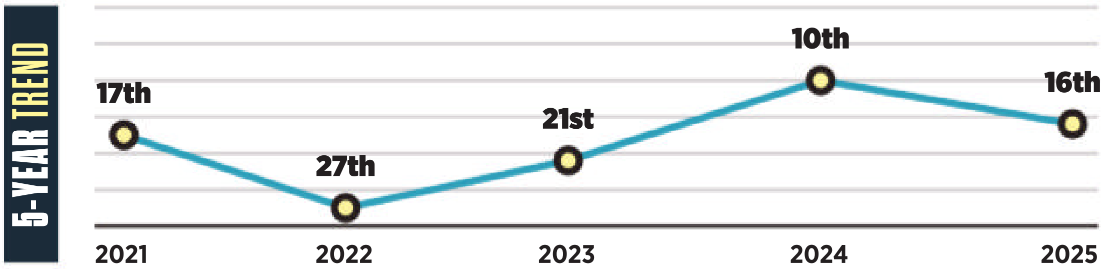
Confident puck-mover is becoming more physically imposing. College sophomore.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | ZACK OSTAPCHUK, C, 21

JENN PIERCE/CALGARY HITMEN

PHILADELPHIA FLYERS

PLAYER DEVELOPMENT CAN PLAY a major role in the future of an NHL team, and that's readily apparent in Philadelphia. The Flyers not only have a couple prospects with brief big-league experience, but they can also boast about having three first-round picks in 2025. GM Daniel Briere, two years into an organizational rebuild, has stuck to his guns when it comes to restructuring the team with homegrown talent. Assistant GM Brent Flahr, who oversees the development system, agrees with this approach. "We're certainly going in the right direction," Flahr said. "It's a process, and we have to be patient." **BY WAYNE FISH**



JETT
LUCHANKO

1
JETT LUCHANKO

C, 18, 5-11, 191
Guelph (OHL)
29–15–24–39–27
2024 draft, 13th overall

OVERALL 16

Luchanko was the biggest surprise of the 2024 training camp, making the final roster cut and playing four NHL games. "Jett is going to be a big part of our future," Flahr said. "He brings a lot of different things to the table with his speed and his competitiveness, along with his details on both sides of the puck. At the world juniors, he killed penalties, did whatever they asked him to do. If he's available next year, then he'll have a much bigger role and hopefully have success."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2025-26

2
OLIVER BONK

D, 20, 6-2, 210
London (OHL)
38–9–22–31–24
2023 draft, 22nd overall

OVERALL 34

The son of former NHLer Radek Bonk, Oliver has been around the game since he was a kid hanging out in NHL dressing rooms. As a result, he's not intimidated by more experienced players. "He made huge strides last year," Flahr said. "We need to get him up against NHL players, the pace, the talent. It's a different ballgame than junior. He's an intelligent player who logs huge minutes. He's got a good mind for the game. His hockey sense is his forte. Something to work on would be his shot."

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2026-27

3
EGOR ZAVRAGIN

G, 19, 6-3, 183
St. Petersburg (KHL)
16–12–0, 2.63, .914
2023 draft, 87th overall

OVERALL 90

The Flyers already have a Russian goalie on their depth chart with Ivan Fedotov, and another countryman will be competing soon in Zavragin. "He's been tremendous since we drafted him," Flahr said. "He's done exceptionally well at the pro level. He's a 19-year-old goalie and he's been really impressive. But he has some things to work on. He's got it all in terms of size, athletic ability, competitiveness. He's an exciting prospect for us. The KHL does a good job developing goalies."

FW24 | No. 7 **NHL** | 2028-29

4
EMIL ANDRAE

D, 23, 5-9, 176
Lehigh Valley (AHL)
18–2–8–10–12
2020 draft, 54th overall

Andrae doesn't have an overpowering physical presence – especially for a defenseman – but he makes up for it with his approach to the game. "He plays with a chip on his shoulder," Flahr said. "With a lot of small guys, you have to have that in order to get that far. He understands leverage and angles. That's allowed him to get this far in the game." The Swede has other things going for him as well. "It's his poise," Flahr said. "His hockey IQ. He's a smart player. Highly competitive. Right from Day 1, he wasn't nervous."

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2025-26

5
ALEX BUMP

LW, 21, 6-2, 200
Western Michigan (NCHC)
28–14–18–32–8
2022 draft, 133rd overall

You don't become a finalist for "Mr. Hockey" in Minnesota for nothing. A fifth-rounder, Bump simply put on his work skates and hustled harder than his foes. "He's arguably the most improved player I've covered the past three years," Flahr said. "He's committed himself and did it fairly quickly. He was a naive kid when we drafted him. But he quickly bought into what it takes to be a pro as far as the off-ice stuff, the training and even the maturity of him personality-wise from Year 1 to Year 2, he's a different person."

FW24 | No. 10 **NHL** | 2027-28

6
JACK BERGLUND

C, 18, 6-4, 209
Farjestad (Swe.)
17–1–2–3–0
2024 draft, 51st overall

Competitive and smart, he plays a heavy game already. His footwork is improving.

7
SPENCER GILL

D, 18, 6-4, 194
Rimouski (QMJHL)
48–6–27–33–54
2024 draft, 59th overall

Mobile and intelligent with the puck. Added 15 pounds. He's hard to play against.

8
CARSON BJARNASON

G, 19, 6-3, 208
Brandon (WHL)
13–11–3, 2.98, .911
2023 draft, 51st overall

A quick learner who's very athletic for his size. He's gotten stronger, too.

9
HUNTER McDONALD

D, 22, 6-4, 205
Lehigh Valley (AHL)
48–2–11–13–73
2022 draft, 165th overall

Throwback D-man with some snarl in his game who understands who he is.

10
DENVER BARKEY

LW, 19, 5-10, 171
London (OHL)
43–20–47–67–20
2023 draft, 95th overall

Highly competitive, skilled and smart. Plays with a chip on his shoulder.

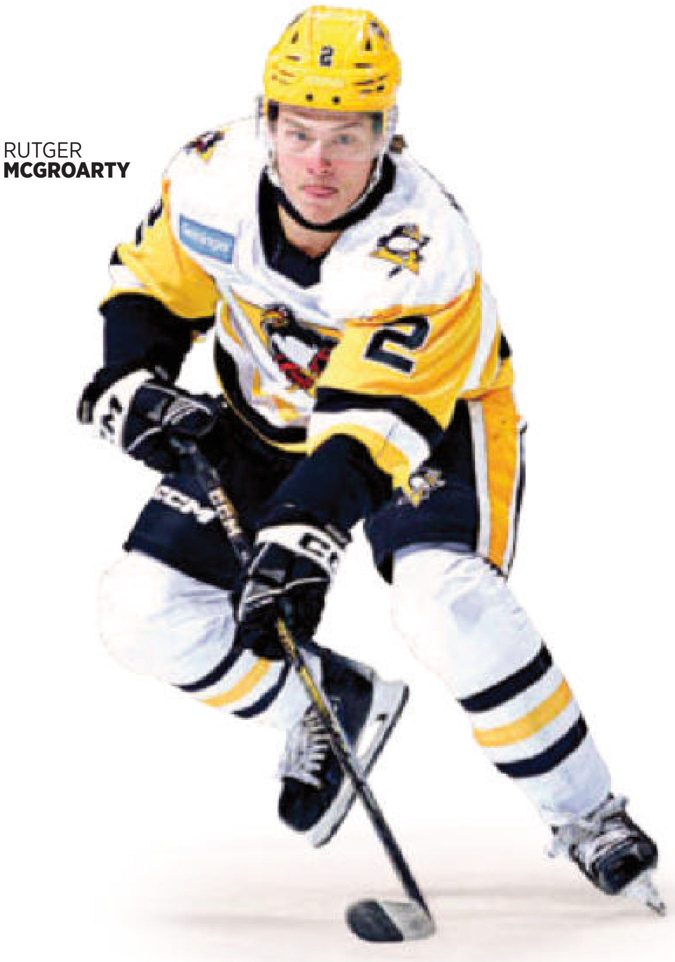
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | MATVEI MICHKOV, RW, 20

NATALIE SHAVER/OHL IMAGES

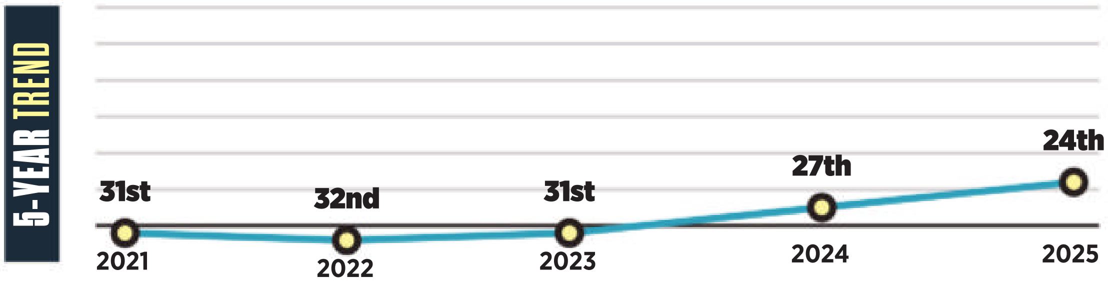
NHL **C+** | **RANK: 24TH**

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

HAVING FALLEN FROM CONTENDER status, the Penguins might normally be considered good candidates for a tear-it-down rebuild at this point. The problem is that course of action isn't compatible with a roster that includes Sidney Crosby. So GM Kyle Dubas has a different idea. "In any sort of dealing that we're doing right now, we're prioritizing getting young prospects that are not draft picks but are closer to playing (in the NHL) and not having to go through the full cycle of development," said assistant GM Jason Spezza. It's a difficult needle to thread, but that's the plan. **BY JONATHAN BOMBULIE**



RUTGER
MCGROARTY



1

HARRISON BRUNICKE

D, 18, 6-3, 202
Kamloops (WHL)
26–4–17–21–27
2024 draft, 44th overall

OVERALL 71

It's easy to see why the Penguins like Brunicke. "He's a 6-foot-3, right-shot D-man who can skate really well," Spezza said. What rocketed Brunicke to near the top of this list was his performance in training camp. He showed a poise beyond his years and an ability to handle the physicality of the pro game. The biggest strike against him has been his inability to stay healthy. He missed the end of last season with a shoulder injury and much of this season with a broken wrist.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

2

RUTGER McGROARTY

RW, 20, 6-1, 205
Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL)
43–6–19–25–24
Trade (Wpg), Aug. 22, 2024

OVERALL 76

As a star player in the NCAA and a key performer for the U.S. at the 2024 WJC who was involved in a somewhat splashy trade before even turning pro, McGroarty has a higher profile than most prospects. Still, Pittsburgh is slow-rolling his development, and he's been working on details in the AHL. The Penguins love his tools, hockey sense and character, and his scoring has picked up. Skating is not a strength. The big question is his ceiling. Does he end up a top-six forward or fringe guy?

FW24 | 1 (Wpg) **NHL** | 2026-27

3

EMIL PIENINIEMI

D, 19, 6-3, 177
Kingston (OHL)
46–7–42–49–18
2023 draft, 91st overall

OVERALL 92

When Pieniniemi was playing limited minutes for Karpat in Finland's top league last season, the prevailing opinion was he could end up on an NHL bottom pair if he played his cards right. A move to North America this season has improved that outlook. Playing against players his own age in the OHL and at the WJC, he's been a minute-muncher who loves to have the puck on his stick. He needs to improve in his own zone and is more fluid than fast as a skater, but he's on a positive trajectory.

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2027-28

4

TANNER HOWE

LW, 19, 5-11, 182
Calgary (WHL)
32–13–15–28–22
2024 draft, 46th overall

After Canada's struggles to score at the World Junior Championship, it's hard to imagine any forward on the roster improved his stock. But that's what the Penguins think Howe did. He was asked to play physically, provide energy and kill penalties, and he checked those boxes with enthusiasm. He's a scrappy winger who goes to the hard areas. If he can bulk up and still keep up with skilled linemates – like he did with Connor Bedard for WHL Regina – he goes from decent prospect to intriguing one.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

5

VILLE KOIVUNEN

RW, 21, 6-0, 172
Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL)
45–15–24–39–40
Trade (Car), March 7, 2024

Koivunen's calling card – and it's a really good one for a prospect to have – is his ability to produce at a young age. He's approached a point per game as a 20-year-old playing for Karpat in Finland and as a 21-year-old in the AHL. He's a little undersized and isn't an explosive skater, but he's got the kind of hockey sense and vision that make him dangerous offensively. The Penguins love his competitiveness, too. He might need a top-six NHL spot to succeed, but it's not like the Penguins won't have at least one of those available.

FW24 | 7 (Car) **NHL** | 2025-26

6

JOEL BLOMQVIST

G, 23, 6-2, 187
Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL)
7–5–3, 2.93, .910
2020 draft, 52nd overall

Moves well from post to post. Already seeing some NHL action.

7

VASILY PONOMAREV

C, 22, 5-11, 180
Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL)
34–11–18–29–38
Trade (Car), March 7, 2024

Limited offensive upside, but he's a versatile and feisty energy player.

8

TRISTAN BROZ

C, 22, 6-0, 205
Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL)
33–15–7–22–12
2021 draft, 58th overall

Sturdy center plays well in traffic. Might have top-six potential.

9

SERGEI MURASHOV

G, 20, 6-2, 172
Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL)
6–0–0, 1.99, .934
2022 draft, 118th overall

Raw but is a spectacular athlete. Made move from Russia this season.

10

FINN HARDING

D, 19, 6-1, 206
Brampton (OHL)
52–6–42–48–57
2024 draft, 223rd overall

Late-blooming, steady right-shot defender among OHL's plus/minus leaders.

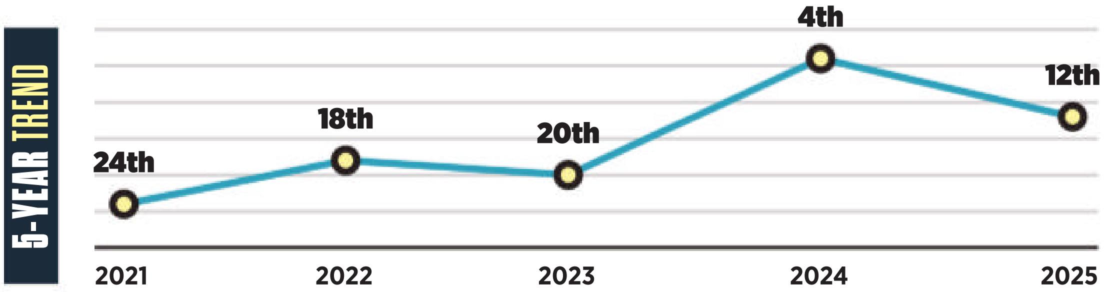
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | OWEN PICKERING, D, 21

PHOTO BY WILKES-BARRE/SCRANTON PENGUINS

B+ | RANK: 12TH NHL

ST. LOUIS BLUES

THE BLUES HAVE, IN recent years, placed an emphasis on drafting forwards to replenish the cupboards, feeling the need to add the proper depth to the position group. And while they haven't exactly veered away from that approach, this past June's draft devoted an extra emphasis on defensemen, with GM Doug Armstrong feeling his club needed to stock up with a number of the Blues' current NHL D-men on the wrong side of 30. Several of the team's recent prospects are starting to mature and are on the cusp of NHL duty, and the Blues feel they need to be spread out in all positions. **BY LOU KORAC**



JIMMY **SNUGGERUD**

1

JIMMY SNUGGERUD

RW, 20, 6-2, 185
Minnesota (Big Ten)
32–20–22–42–25
2022 draft, 23rd overall

OVERALL 8

The Blues felt Snuggerud would be their next pure shooter and goal-scorer at the NHL level and that he was ready for the NHL last season. Initially, St. Louis wanted Snuggerud to leave school after 2023-24, but he wanted to play one more year to chase a national title. "We obviously made a push to get him to come, and he was honest," Armstrong said. "He thought they were going to have a really good team and he thought he could be a big part of that, and he was right."

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2025-26

2

DALIBOR DVORSKY

C, 19, 6-1, 206
Springfield (AHL)
43–15–20–35–4
2023 draft, 10th overall

OVERALL 12

All along, the Blues have wanted Dvorsky to mature mentally and physically and to do so in North America. After a short stint in Sweden to begin the 2023-24 campaign, Dvorsky came across the Atlantic to develop, and it has worked out well, including a dominant showing at the world juniors for a second straight year. Dvorsky needed to gain size, strength and a shooter's mentality. He's done so accordingly in the AHL this season after one year in the OHL.

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

3

ADAM JIRICEK

D, 18, 6-3, 180
Brantford (OHL)
18–3–6–9–2
2024 draft, 16th overall

OVERALL 39

St. Louis just wants to see the defenseman play some games. Last season was a tough one for Jiricek, who overcame a knee injury at the 2024 WJC, but the Blues like the physical, defense-minded skill set that he can bring to them one day. "He enjoys defending," Armstrong said. "He's physical. He likes to break up plays. He finds value at both ends of the rink, which is something that excites us. He has showed a real desire to impact the 200-foot part of the game."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

4

OTTO STENBERG

C, 19, 5-11, 180
Springfield (AHL)
13–2–5–7–2
2023 draft, 25th overall

OVERALL 70

Stenberg brings qualities the Blues desire at forward: someone willing to drive the net and shoot pucks. Stenberg's stats in Sweden (six points in 25 games) don't reflect that, but the Blues were anxious to get him to North America right after the 2025 WJC. "It's tough for 19-, 20-year-olds to play in that league," said Blues assistant GM Tim Taylor. "Sometimes, players get lost over there. They have to jump up from junior to that league just because it is so hard. It's very comparable to the AHL."

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

5

THEO LINDSTEIN

D, 20, 6-1, 180
Brynas (Swe.)
35–3–3–6–2
2023 draft, 29th overall

Lindstein is a smooth skater with a knack for a quick breakout with the puck. At times, it's seamless. At times, it's been challenging, but the Blues have been fine with Lindstein's development in Sweden. "You have to fight for every inch you get at that age – at 19 – in that league," Armstrong said. "Their minutes aren't what they would be if they were playing against their peers. But that's how the Europeans do it, and we accept that." Lindstein wants to bulk up and get involved more offensively as he matures.

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2026-27

6

COLIN RALPH

D, 19, 6-4, 225
St. Cloud State (NCHC)
27–1–5–6–16
2024 draft, 48th overall

Rangy, lanky and physical. Ralph is an excellent skater who knows how to kill plays.

7

LUKAS FISCHER

D, 18, 6-3, 184
Sarnia (OHL)
36–12–15–27–61
2024 draft, 56th overall

Strong skater plays with pace and has very good hockey IQ. Reads plays well.

8

ALEKSANTERI KASKIMAKI

C, 21, 6-0, 193
Springfield (AHL)
46–9–19–28–6
2022 draft, 73rd overall

Two-way player who isn't afraid to hang around the net, utilizing his quick hands.

9

ADAM JECHO

C, 18, 6-5, 201
Edmonton (WHL)
41–17–21–38–16
2024 draft, 95th overall

Composed checking forward who uses his size to protect the puck.

10

TOMAS MRSIC

C, 19, 6-0, 170
Prince Albert (WHL)
49–31–45–76–26
2024 draft, 113th overall

Undersized but fast and a highly skilled puck distributor. Gets his shot off quickly.

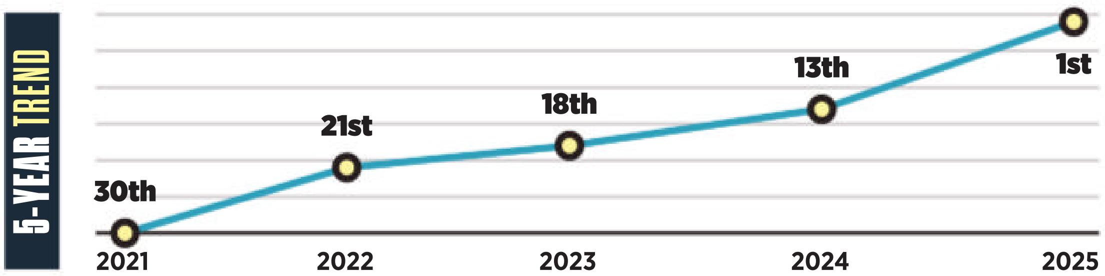
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

PHOTO BY MINNESOTA ATHLETICS

SAN JOSE SHARKS

SAN JOSE HOPES THE most painful part of the rebuild is over. The Sharks sank to the bottom of the NHL standings last season after sending several veterans out the door for draft picks and prospects. While the moves were badly needed, they've also been painful, with wins few and far between and thousands of empty seats for several home games. But suffering has also paid dividends. Last year's No. 1 overall pick, Macklin Celebrini, is primed for stardom, and the prospect pool is impressive and deep – and it's got size. GM Mike Grier generally has stuck to drafting players who are 200-plus pounds. **BY CURTIS PASHELKA**

SAM
DICKINSON



1

SAM DICKINSON

D, 18, 6-3, 210
London (OHL)
40–20–41–61–26
2024 draft, 11th overall

OVERALL 7

As one of London's offensive leaders, Dickinson has been everything the Sharks hoped he would be this season as a two-way D-man. He represented Canada at the WJC, and while the results for the team were disappointing, Grier thinks the experience will help when Dickinson sees the NHL playoffs someday. "You're going to be in loud buildings and something bad is going to happen at some point," Grier said. "How do you respond? It was a great learning experience for him."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2025-26

2

QUENTIN MUSTY

LW, 19, 6-2, 200
Sudbury (OHL)
24–19–18–37–6
2023 draft, 26th overall

OVERALL 41

Musty didn't have a smooth start to his season. He requested a trade out of Sudbury in October, but that went nowhere. He then broke his hand in November, which cost him a chance to be named to Team USA for the world juniors. Musty shone at a rookie tournament in mid-September, but he was inconsistent once camp began. "He's just learning the pro game," said Sharks coach Ryan Warsofsky. "The style, the speed, the pace, the details, the habits you need to have to play at this level."

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2026-27

3

SHAKIR MUKHAMADULLIN

D, 23, 6-4, 185
San Jose (AHL)
21–0–9–9–6
Trade (NJ), Feb. 26, 2023

OVERALL 68

Mukhamadullin missed camp with a groin injury, which perhaps explains his slow start to the AHL season. His play improved enough to warrant an NHL recall in December, but Grier said Mukhamadullin hasn't quite recaptured the form that made him an AHL stud last season. The Sharks remain enthusiastic about where he's headed. " 'Shak' is big and long, can make plays, can skate and break out pucks," Warsofsky said. "He's going to get better and better."

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

4

IGOR CHERNYSHOV

LW, 19, 6-3, 225
Saginaw (OHL)
8–11–12–23–0
2024 draft, 33rd overall

OVERALL 72

Chernyshov slipped in the draft and then spent several months recovering from an August procedure to repair his shoulder. But as he neared full health, he spent some time practising with the AHL's Barracuda and didn't look out of place among older players. "He's a tank," Grier said. "Skates like the wind. I would say his ceiling is a top-six scoring winger. Whether he can get there, who knows." Chernyshov has been strong with Saginaw in his first year playing in North America.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

5

FILIP BYSTEDT

C, 21, 6-3, 210
San Jose (AHL)
42–9–16–25–22
2022 draft, 27th overall

OVERALL 88

Although Bystedt has had bouts of inconsistency, the Sharks have been happy with his development. His qualities – the length, size, and skating – still stand out, with Bystedt projecting to be a solid third-line NHL center. He's now killing penalties in the AHL. "For him, it's still just cleaning up the details and how hard you have to defend here," Grier said. In his first full AHL year, Bystedt is still working on gap control on the smaller ice surface after coming over from Sweden.

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

6

KASPER HALTTUNEN

RW, 19, 6-3, 207
London (OHL)
23–9–17–26–28
2023 draft, 36th overall

He has an NHL-caliber shot but must refine other aspects of his game.

7

COLLIN GRAF

RW, 22, 6-1, 190
San Jose (AHL)
35–8–24–32–12
Free agent, April 4, 2024

He has impressed with his heady play. Next step is maintaining pace at NHL level.

8

LUCA CAGNONI

D, 20, 5-9, 180
San Jose (AHL)
45–12–22–34–18
2023 draft, 123rd overall

First-year pro has adjusted well to AHL. Needs work on defending and consistency.

9

LEO SAHLIN WALLENIUS

D, 18, 6-0, 176
TPS (Fin.)
7–1–2–3–2
2024 draft, 53rd overall

He possesses skill and hockey sense, but will it translate to North American game?

10

CAMERON LUND

C, 20, 6-2, 195
Northeastern (HE)
28–11–16–27–8
2022 draft, 34th overall

An offensive leader on bad Huskies team. Good shot and physical but an average skater.

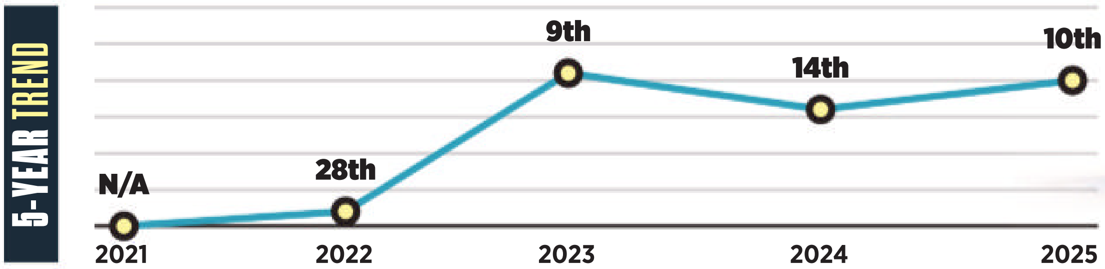
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | MACKLIN CELEBRINI, C, 18; WILL SMITH, C, 19

PHOTO BY LONDON KNIGHTS

B+ | RANK: 10TH NHL

SEATTLE KRAKEN

IF KRAKEN PROSPECTS NEED encouragement, they need not look to the veterans. Instead, the young guns in Seattle – or, more likely, Coachella Valley – can look to recent products of the system. The emergence of Ryker Evans and Tye Kartye proves the franchise's development model is producing the desired results. "They set a real foundation for how a prospect comes into the AHL, proves himself on the ice and in the playoffs and then earns their way up to the NHL," said Kraken director of player development Jeff Tambellini. "They've set a great path for all the players to come." **BY JARED CLINTON**



NIKLAS **KOKKO**

1

BERKLY CATTON

C, 19, 5-10, 175
Spokane (WHL)
43–31–57–88–26
2024 draft, 8th overall

OVERALL 26

Catton's 116-point draft year had Seattle sprinting to the stage to take him at No. 8. That he's only built on that this season has Seattle salivating at the thought of what he could become. Catton has leaned more triggerman than playmaker, but he can still drive the attack with the puck on his stick. Offense doesn't funnel so much to him as through him. "You see this complete offensive player who is still making strength gains," Tambellini said, "and adding to his game defensively."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

2

JANI NYMAN

LW, 20, 6-4, 217
Coachella Valley (AHL)
48–20–14–34–25
2022 draft, 49th overall

OVERALL 94

Whether a player's game will translate from one league to the next is never guaranteed. That Nyman's has – and has gotten better, said Tambellini – is a testament to his skill set and understanding of the game. Though he played on the right wing in Finland, the Kraken have moved him to his strong side in the AHL to great results. He entered February leading the Firebirds and AHL rookies in goals. A part of that has been his work on the power play, where he has set up on the half-wall.

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2025-26

3

OSCAR FISKER MOLGAARD

C, 20, 6-0, 168
HV71 (Swe.)
29–4–13–17–0
2023 draft, 52nd overall

OVERALL 99

Though Fisker Molgaard signed his entry-level deal last June, Seattle had him play another season in Sweden. That decision is paying dividends. What first catches the eye is his uptick in production, but Seattle's brass is far more impressed with the way he handles the responsibilities required of a center. His skating is strong, he's good with the puck, and 'OFM' is showing confidence in making plays through the neutral zone. Bet on him arriving in the AHL next season, at the latest.

FW24 | No. 10 **NHL** | 2026-27

4

NIKLAS KOKKO

G, 20, 6-4, 190
Coachella Valley (AHL)
14-4-1, 2.52, .908
2022 draft, 58th overall

Last season in Finland, after a run as Karpat's backup, Kokko was loaned to Lahti, where he established himself as one of the circuit's top goalies, leading the Pelicans to a silver medal. He then came to North America to watch Coachella Valley's playoff run. Tambellini said that helped Kokko to understand the rigors of the AHL. "He's been prepared for every start and focused on just playing the games he's been given," Tambellini said. "He's established himself as a very good goalie prospect."

FW24 | nr **NHL** | 2027-28

5

EDUARD SALE

LW, 19, 6-1, 170
Coachella Valley (AHL)
34–5–11–16–6
2023 draft, 20th overall

Sale had a brilliant start to his rookie AHL campaign, with four goals and 12 points in his first 13 games. Then came a slump in which he mustered just one point in 10 games. The timing of the world juniors was perfect, though, as Sale jetted off and showcased why Seattle believes he can be an elite talent and big-game player. Named Czechia's captain, Sale came alive down the stretch, scoring once in each of the quarterfinal and bronze-medal games. In the latter, he also netted consecutive shootout goals.

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

6

RYAN WINTERTON

C, 21, 6-2, 193
Coachella Valley (AHL)
38–12–15–27–26
2021 draft, 67th overall

Small-area work makes him a reliable all-situations player. Has seen some NHL action.

7

CARSON REHKOPF

LW, 20, 6-2, 202
Brampton (OHL)
43–32–37–69–20
2023 draft, 50th overall

Skilled sniper with high ceiling. Improved fitness will elevate his overall game.

8

JAGGER FIRKUS

RW, 20, 5-11, 163
Coachella Valley (AHL)
48–10–15–25–10
2022 draft, 35th overall

Profiles as pure scorer, but his checking ability has impressed the Kraken's staff.

9

JULIUS MIETTINEN

C, 19, 6-3, 207
Everett (WHL)
30–10–24–34–27
2024 draft, 40th overall

Creates space by going to tough areas. Modest output for Finns at the WJC.

10

NATHAN VILLENEUVE

C, 18, 6-0, 195
Sudbury (OHL)
44–27–23–50–96
2024 draft, 63rd overall

Doesn't sacrifice 'D' to create offense. On pace for career year in OHL.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | SHANE WRIGHT, C, 21

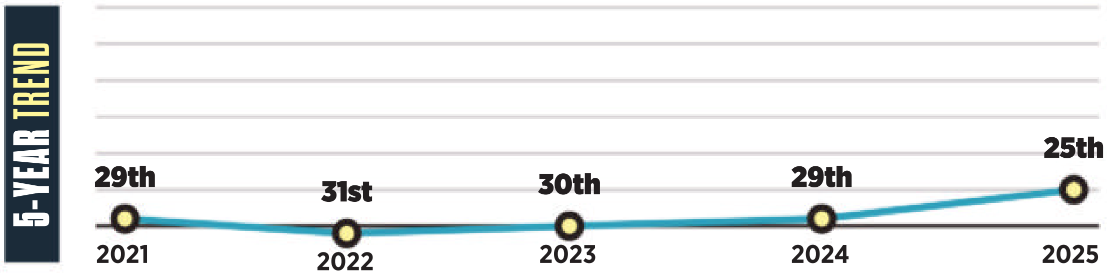
MIKE ZITEK/COACHELLA VALLEY FIREBIRDS

NHL | C+ | RANK: 25TH

TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

ISAAC **HOWARD**

SPENDING A DECADE WINNING in the NHL means making trades to remain at a high level. During the Lightning's decade-plus run of success, the team's pool of prospects helped propel them to the top. But the farm system isn't what it used to be. "Obviously, if we don't have a lot of first-round picks, we don't have a lot of second-round picks, it's harder to infuse the pipeline with high-end skill," said GM Julien BriseBois. So Tampa Bay has tried to build in other ways, with shrewd mid-round picks, project picks and undrafted free agents. But that doesn't mean the pipeline is devoid of skill. **BY ERIK ERLENDSSON**



1

ISAAC HOWARD

LW, 20, 5-11, 190
Michigan State (Big Ten)
30–22–21–43–10
2022 draft, 31st overall

As an NCAA junior, Howard has more than doubled his previous-best goal total. Now in his second season with the Spartans after transferring from Minnesota-Duluth, he's put in his work off the ice, both in the gym and in the film room. "There's more pop in his skating, and his play has really evolved," BriseBois said. "His two-way play is much better. His competitiveness in battles, being able to win battles because now he's physically stronger, being able to make more plays through checks."

OVERALL 73

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2026-27

2

ETHAN GAUTHIER

RW, 20, 6-0, 183
Drummondville (QMJHL)
39–20–31–51–18
2023 draft, 37th overall

A big part of the Voltigeurs' QMJHL title team, Gauthier also repped Canada at the WJC. His work ethic and shutdown ability project him as an effective middle-six NHLer who can add scoring pop. "His all-around, 200-foot game has really shaped up," said Bolts director of player development Stacy Roest. "A student of the game, wanting to get better. Always looking for help for details in his game to improve, and it's paying off. He's an energy, two-way (player) who can make plays."

OVERALL 85

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

3

JACK FINLEY

C, 22, 6-6, 220
Syracuse (AHL)
21–5–7–12–6
2020 draft, 57th overall

Injuries have slowed Finley's progress. That was extra painful at the end of last season, when he had started taking on top-line responsibilities with the AHL's Crunch until he underwent a pair of surgeries that kept him out until December 2024. Finley did make his NHL debut in January. Roest said Finley's skating ability and finishing skill around the net are alluring for a player of his size. "He just needs to keep getting the reps after missing that much time," said Roest, who also lauded Finley's hockey sense.

FW24 | No. 5 **NHL** | 2026-27

4

NIKO HUUHTANEN

RW, 21, 6-3, 198
Syracuse (AHL)
30–8–10–18–35
2021 draft, 224th overall

In his draft year, Huuhtanen was considered a long-term project due to his skating. But since he was taken with the final pick of the 2021 draft, he's established himself as one of Tampa Bay's top prospects. After a couple of years of working with the Bolts' development staff, he's made significant progress on his skating, allowing the strengths of his game – his shot and hands around the net – to shine in his first AHL season. Roest added that Huuhtanen also protects the puck well and gets in on the forecheck.

FW24 | nr **NHL** | 2027-28

5

DANIIL PYLENKOV

D, 24, 6-1, 194
Dynamo Moscow (KHL)
54–5–20–25–18
2021 draft, 196th overall

Nothing really jumps out with Pylenkov except when looking at the whole package. That's because he does a lot of little things well. Each season, he has seen his role increase and his numbers grow. The Lightning know the six-year KHL vet is in a good spot in Russia but remain in close contact with an eye on bringing him to North America. "We like him as a puck-mover," Roest said. "He can kill penalties. He can run a power play. Just a nice two-way defenseman that can skate well, and he's smart."

FW24 | No. 8 **NHL** | 2026-27

6

MAXIM GROSHEV

RW, 23, 6-2, 198
Syracuse (AHL)
42–4–5–9–15
2020 draft, 85th overall

Roest believes Groshev is underrated and likes his "power, speed and strength."

7

GABRIEL SZTURC

C, 21, 5-11, 194
Syracuse (AHL)
32–4–9–13–10
Free agent, March 2, 2024

Injuries have slowed his season, but he plays top-line minutes in all situations.

8

DYLAN DUKE

LW, 21, 5-10, 177
Syracuse (AHL)
38–14–9–23–28
2021 draft, 126th overall

Roest: "He plays a pro game. He drives the line, drags guys into the fight."

9

MAXWELL CROZIER

D, 24, 6-3, 198
Syracuse (AHL)
29–3–11–14–52
2019 draft, 120th overall

Roest said Crozier plays hard, moves the puck well and has great hockey sense.

10

CONNOR KURTH

RW, 21, 6-0, 215
Minnesota (Big Ten)
32–13–18–31–10
2022 draft, 192nd overall

Bolts brass happy with Kurth's improved conditioning, strength and speed.

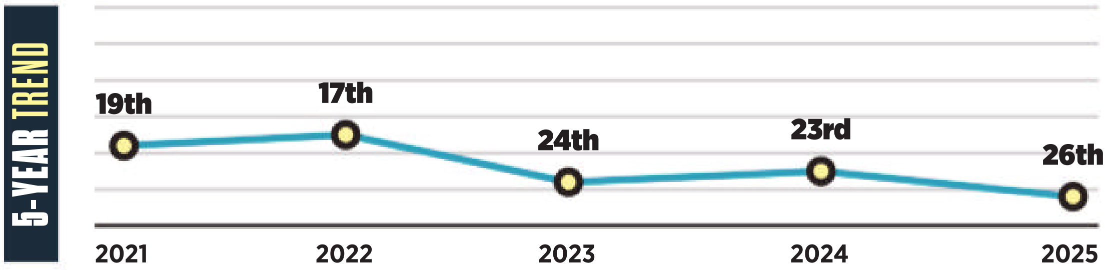
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | CONOR GEEKIE, C, 20

PHOTO BY MSU ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS

C | RANK: 26TH **NHL**

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

WHEN YOU'RE IN WIN-NOW mode, the way the Toronto Maple Leafs have been in the past several seasons, you have the luxury of not hurrying your young prospects. And that's best for the top players in the Leafs' group, who, despite having some tangible success in major junior, could probably use some time in the minors. "The good thing in all of their cases is we're in no rush," said Maple Leafs assistant GM Hayley Wickenheiser. "We're not in a hurry for any of them to get into the lineup tomorrow. We've got some talent and some projects all at the same time." **BY KEN CAMPBELL**



EASTON **COWAN**

1

EASTON **COWAN**

RW, 19, 6-0, 185
London (OHL)
32–18–25–43–26
2023 draft, 28th overall

OVERALL 35

The driving offensive force behind the best team in the CHL this season, Cowan has felt some very real bumps in the road, starting with an underwhelming training camp and continuing with a second straight WJC in which he struggled to score. In Ottawa, he seemed to deviate from what's brought him success. "I think he's in a bit of reset right now," Wickenheiser said. "It's not easy to have all eyes on you in this market, so the challenge for him right now is as much mental as it is physical."

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2025-26

2

FRASER **MINTEN**

C, 20, 6-2, 195
Toronto (AHL)
19–5–5–10–6
2022 draft, 38th overall

OVERALL 66

Unlike last year, Minten was not on the 2024-25 opening-night roster, but he's been the first call-up when the Leafs have run into injuries at forward. It's uncertain what his offensive upside is, but he has the look of a player who will have a long NHL career. As hockey people love saying, Minten plays the game the right way. If Minten can develop more of an offensive game and finish his chances more consistently, he'll find himself as a top-six forward. Otherwise, he'll be a solid third-liner.

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

3

BEN **DANFORD**

D, 19, 6-2, 195
Oshawa (OHL)
49–5–16–21–46
2024 draft, 31st overall

A concussion sustained in rookie camp knocked Danford out of the rookie tournament, main camp and delayed the start of his OHL season. The captain of the Generals has since put up a solid year, but the Leafs would like him to concentrate on the defense-first game that made him a first-round pick in the first place. Being so geographically close to the NHL team has afforded Danford lots of 1-on-1 time with former NHL D-man Jake Muzzin, who now works in player development with the Maple Leafs.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

4

DENNIS **HILDEBY**

G, 23, 6-7, 222
Toronto (AHL)
8-4-2, 2.75, .899
2022 draft, 122nd overall

Hildeby is a mountain of a man who has been the call-up when Joseph Woll and Anthony Stolarz have both been injured. He moves well for a big man, and, in his second full year in North America, he's developing the confidence he needs to face the world's best shooters. He is sometimes too aggressive and can have trouble letting the game come to him. "He's a really mature player, and he's really dialled in with his pro habits," Wickenheiser said. "He's someone you don't have to worry about in that regard."

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

5

NIKITA **GREBENKIN**

RW, 21, 6-2, 210
Toronto (AHL)
32–8–10–18–16
2022 draft, 135th overall

Even though he went pointless in a seven-game stint with the Leafs, Grebenkin earned a legion of admirers for his energetic play on the ice and his colorful demeanor off it. He manages to play a rambunctious style without taking a lot of PIM and has produced at a good clip in the AHL. "He's got that thing, that swagger," Wickenheiser said. "There's a lot to like about him. He has a carefree attitude in a good way." Grebenkin's skating needs refining, as do his play without the puck and his positional play.

FW24 | No. 5 **NHL** | 2026-27

6

TOPI **NIEMELA**

D, 22, 6-0, 181
Toronto (AHL)
40–0–16–16–8
2020 draft, 64th overall

Physical development and defensive awareness still require work in the AHL.

7

ARTUR **AKHTYAMOV**

G, 23, 6-2, 170
Toronto (AHL)
10-4-3, 2.66, .904
2020 draft, 106th overall

Has good natural reflexes and an ability to move laterally. Year 1 in North America.

8

MIROSLAV **HOLINKA**

C, 19, 6-2, 185
Edmonton (WHL)
38–15–21–36–8
2024 draft, 151st overall

He has good offensive instincts, but his skating must get more explosive.

9

NOAH **CHADWICK**

D, 19, 6-4, 203
Lethbridge (WHL)
52–11–32–43–34
2023 draft, 185th overall

CHL's scholastic player of the year for 2023-24 is also cerebral on the ice.

10

MATT **LAHEY**

D, 18, 6-5, 203
Fargo (USHL)
43–2–10–12–14
2024 draft, 200th overall

Michigan State commit is a long-range prospect with a long reach. Uses size well.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

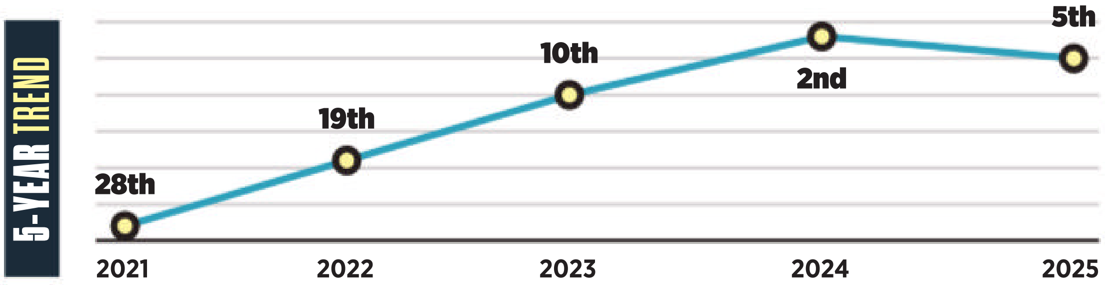
PHOTO BY LONDON KNIGHTS

NHL **A-** | **RANK: 5TH**

UTAH HOCKEY CLUB

TIJ **IGINLA**

THE NHL IS IN Utah for the long haul, and while the Hockey Club may not have a permanent name just yet, what they do possess is a deep well of prospects who could thrill their newfound fans for years to come. During his playing days, GM Bill Armstrong was an intimidating blueliner who checked in at 6-foot-4 and 215 pounds, and he sure likes players cut from that same cloth. Utah's prospect ranks are stocked with big players who play a physically imposing game. That, along with a balance of high-energy, high-skill forwards, gives the Utah faithful a lot to look forward to in the coming years. **BY AUSTIN FACER**



1

TIJ IGINLA

C, 18, 6-0, 195
Kelowna (WHL)
21–14–18–32–13
2024 draft, 6th overall

Iginla, the first draft pick in team history, was on a tear for Kelowna at the end of November before having to shut down his post-draft season after undergoing hip surgery in early December. Utah scouts have raved over Iginla's rapid improvement and think he can evolve into an elite NHL scorer. "I said to him, we have a lot of 20-goal scorers; we need a 50-goal scorer," Armstrong said. "He's got a chance to kind of push the pace and score some goals for us. I love his mindset."

OVERALL 10

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2026-27

2

DMITRIY SIMASHEV

D, 20, 6-4, 198
Yaroslavl (KHL)
49–1–5–6–4
2023 draft, 6th overall

Scouts have called Simashev's skating form and posture "perfect." That's especially impressive at his size. He has not found the scoresheet too often with Lokomotiv this year, but he has seen his ice time increase dramatically the past few seasons. Simashev's long stick and skating ability give him a massive defensive range and make it nearly impossible for opponents to break into the offensive zone with speed. He has all the tools to be a premier shutdown D-man.

OVERALL 20

FW24 | 1 (Ari) **NHL** | 2026-27

3

DANIIL BUT

LW, 20, 6-5, 203
Yaroslavl (KHL)
47–9–15–24–16
2023 draft, 12th overall

But, who's been compared to Buffalo's Tage Thompson by some, possesses remarkable skating ability for someone his size. What really makes scouts' mouths water, however, has been his offensive creativity and potent scoring touch. His shot, on either leg, has been labelled as "textbook." The son of longtime KHL mainstay Anton But has also seen his role evolve with Lokomotiv recently. But, who just turned 20, has been playing a grown man's game for a while now. It's paying off.

OVERALL 29

FW24 | 3 (Ari) **NHL** | 2026-27

4

MAVERIC LAMOUREUX

D, 21, 6-7, 214
Tucson (AHL)
17–2–6–8–12
2022, 29th overall

Lamoureux showed great confidence with the puck after being called into NHL duty when a slew of injuries besieged Utah's blueline. He showed zero hesitation getting physically involved – but he could stand to dial things back; after just 15 games, he'd quickly become Utah's PIM leader. Still, he shows great poise and can provide offense from the deep corners of the zone, creating rebounds and shot-passes from range. He will become a vital, physically imposing piece on Utah's back end.

OVERALL 56

FW24 | 4 (Ari) **NHL** | 2026-27

5

COLE BEAUDOIN

C, 18, 6-2, 211
Barrie (OHL)
37–17–21–38–4
2024 draft, 24th overall

Utah traded three picks to get back into the first round of the 2024 prospect call to draft Beaudoin. Management has praised the "physical specimen" for his work ethic and high motor. He's an agent of chaos in all three zones; just ask those who watched Canada at the WJC. Armstrong hopes Beaudoin can, in addition to being a difference-maker on the ice, also become a leader among his mates. "His work ethic might change the culture of our organization," Armstrong said, "just how hard he plays."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

6

ARTEM DUDA

D, 20, 6-1, 187
Tucson (AHL)
45–2–15–17–4
2022 draft, 36th overall

Playmaking two-way 'D' possesses strong decision-making skills with the puck.

7

MICHAEL HRABAL

G, 20, 6-7, 215
UMass (HE)
14–10–2, 2.47, .924
2023 draft, 38th overall

Long frame helps him defeat screens. Gets from post-to-post quickly and effectively.

8

JOSH DOAN

RW, 23, 6-1, 185
Tucson (AHL)
28–11–15–26–22
2021 draft, 37th overall

Changes momentum through his determination and tenacity as a forechecker.

9

TOMAS LAVOIE

D, 18, 6-4, 218
Cape Breton (QMJHL)
46–11–34–45–24
2024 draft, 89th overall

Prototypical Armstrong D-man: big body, intimidating presence and a long stick.

10

JONATHAN CASTAGNA

C, 19, 6-2, 200
Cornell (ECAC)
23–3–8–11–14
2023 draft, 70th overall

Quick hands, feet and multi-dimensional skating ability. Dangerous on the rush.

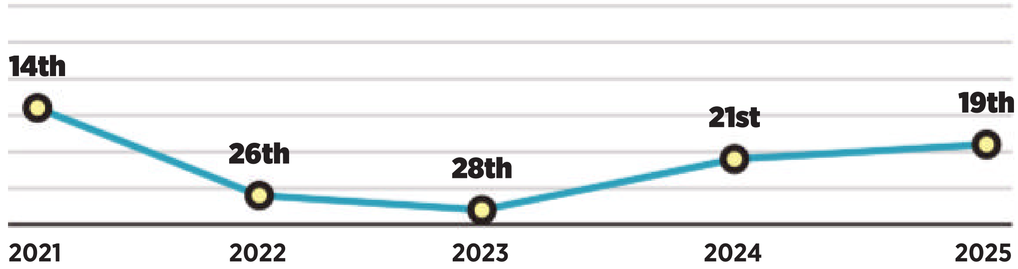
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | LOGAN COOLEY, C, 20; DYLAN GUENTHER, RW, 21

STEVE DUNSMOOR/KELOWNA ROCKETS

VANCOUVER CANUCKS

DRAFTING, DEVELOPING AND WINNING are seldom linked in the same sentence, because it's challenging to have all three align simultaneously. The Canucks are acutely aware of ongoing challenges, but where their prospect pool ranks among NHL clubs isn't keeping them up at night. "You can rank prospects, but they're all on different paths and trajectories," said Vancouver assistant GM/Abbotsford GM Ryan Johnson. "You develop to win, and you win with development. We also wanted to make sure we didn't have a young (AHL) team getting our teeth kicked in every night." **BY BEN KUZMA**

5-YEAR TREND



JONATHAN
LEKKERIMAKI

1

JONATHAN LEKKERIMAKI

RW, 20, 5-11, 172
Abbotsford (AHL)
28–17–8–25–0
2022 draft, 15th overall

Lekkerimaki has transitioned seamlessly from the Swedish pro ranks. He fires off hard, accurate shots at pace – even in heavy NHL traffic – and processes the game quickly. "He scores goals with very little risk on the other end of it," Johnson said. "He doesn't sacrifice puck management in the defensive zone or with responsibilities in other parts of the game." He needs to add strength, but he competes hard and is better than most top prospects at finding quiet shooting areas.

OVERALL 22

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2025-26

2

TOM WILLANDER

D, 20, 6-1, 191
Boston University (HE)
28–2–16–18–6
2023 draft, 11th overall

A strong NCCA freshman season put Willander on a fast development track. His skating and puck movement are elite, and there are no missing links in his game. Willander is adept at breaking up plays at his own blueline and quickly pivoting to go on the attack. He plays without panic, and his poise has him looking like a high-end blueliner. "Very strong and mature kid with how he carries himself," Johnson said. "A lot to work with. Very coachable and real passion for the game."

OVERALL 32

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2026-27

3

ARTURS SILOVS

G, 23, 6-4, 203
Abbotsford (AHL)
9–4–0, 2.55, .901
2019 draft, 156th overall

At the 2023 worlds, Silovs was named MVP as Latvia claimed bronze. He then became the talk of Vancouver last spring when he helped the Canucks to Game 7 of the second round. But a rough start to this season meant a return to Abbotsford. He needed to calm down an acrobatic game, control rebounds and track pucks better from distance. "Everybody has seen what he's capable of," Johnson said. "His practice habits and how he carries himself have grown tenfold. He's already proven something at the NHL level."

FW24 | No. 5 **NHL** | 2025-26

4

AATU RATY

C, 22, 6-2, 190
Abbotsford (AHL)
29–12–17–29–24
Trade (NYI), Jan. 30, 2023

Raty impressed with a 56.3 faceoff percentage in his first 20 NHL games this season before returning to the AHL. Improved strength and power have added to the feisty and versatile Finn's ability to hound foes on the forecheck, and playing with bite has increased his stock. Adding a stronger stride will help even more. "You can argue he's one of our most improved players," Johnson said. "He had a stretch of NHL games where he earned that trust from the coaching staff. And he keeps working on his game and it's showing."

FW24 | No. 6 **NHL** | 2025-26

5

MAX SASSON

C, 24, 6-1, 181
Abbotsford (AHL)
23–6–7–13–8
Free agent, March 26, 2023

The jump from the NCAA to the AHL was one of opportunity for Sasson, who responded in his rookie pro season with 42 points in 56 games. That, along with his strong camp and good reads, put the versatile center on the NHL radar. "Extremely good transporter of the puck and does it very quickly, so he's easy to play with and makes people around him better," Johnson said. "His game in the AHL really translates to the NHL." It was also essential for Sasson to focus on complete play in the 'A' to gain favor.

FW24 | No. 7 **NHL** | 2025-26

6

ARSHDEEP BAINS

LW, 24, 6-0, 184
Abbotsford (AHL)
31–7–19–26–22
Free agent, March 11, 2022

Processes quickly. Understands risk-reward of offense. Has evolved to create chances.

7

ELIAS PETTERSSON

D, 21, 6-3, 209
Abbotsford (AHL)
38–1–12–13–38
2022 draft, 80th overall

Plays big. Hits hard. Moves well. Passes are pinpoint. Will have a long NHL career.

8

TY MUELLER

C, 22, 5-11, 185
Abbotsford (AHL)
44–7–16–23–18
2023 draft, 105th overall

Pleasant surprise so far. Deceptive skater who is efficient in all situations.

9

SAWYER MYNIO

D, 19, 6-1, 181
Calgary (WHL)
34–10–19–29–44
2023 draft, 89th overall

Smooth skater who moves pucks well. Has an edge to his game despite slight stature.

10

KIRILL KUDRYAVTSEV

D, 21, 5-11, 200
Abbotsford (AHL)
41–3–18–21–12
2022 draft, 208th overall

Smart. Mobile. High compete level. Plays to his identity. Has power-play potential.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

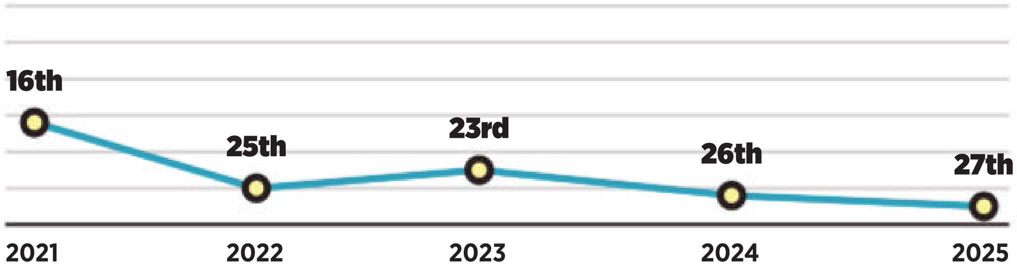
PHOTO BY ABBOTSFORD CANUCKS

VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

THE DRAFT-AND-DEVELOP model isn't really how the Golden Knights go about their business. Draft-and-deal is more like it. Vegas has had eight first-round picks since arriving in 2017, but only two of them are still with the organization, with all the rest traded off as part of the team's constant chase for every top-end player who becomes available on the market. It's certainly paid off, as the Golden Knights are continually a threat to get their hands on a second Stanley Cup. The prospects in Vegas' pipeline are valuable commodities – it's just a question of if, and for how long, they stay in the flow. **BY SCOTT ZERR**

TREVOR
CONNELLY

5-YEAR TREND



1

TREVOR CONNELLY

LW, 19, 6-1, 165
Providence (HE)
17–4–8–12–23
2024 draft, 19th overall

History would suggest that Connelly is exactly the type of player the Golden Knights would dangle in front of other teams as they try to lure in a big name for another Stanley Cup run. For starters, Connelly has all the makings of a high-end talent. "He's dynamic with the puck and drives offense," said Providence coach Nate Leaman. Connelly's speed, vision and playmaking ability are evident, and he's come through in the clutch as an NCAA freshman and has been a key factor on the power play.

OVERALL 33

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

2

BRENDAN BRISSON

C, 23, 6-0, 198
Henderson (AHL)
39–5–11–16–26
2020 draft, 29th overall

Brisson is the definition of a player on the cusp. But finding a full-time spot on a deep, Cup-contending squad has a been a challenge, and Brisson has done about all he can in the minors. "Timing is not something you can control," said Henderson GM Tim Speltz. "You just have to be as ready as you can be when the opportunity comes, and Brendan is right there." The former NCAA Michigan standout has a terrific offensive mind, especially as a top-notch shooter who can play both wings.

OVERALL 77

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2025-26

3

MATYAS SAPOVALIV

C, 21, 6-4, 203
Henderson (AHL)
48–8–8–16–4
2022 draft, 48th overall

Credit is due to the Vegas scouts who ignored the negative noise about Sapovaliv in his draft year. He's been a revelation in the AHL. An oft-depleted Henderson roster has afforded Sapovaliv a bigger role than expected, but there's no sign of the lack of competitiveness tag that dogged him in junior. "He's handled everything that's been thrown at him," Speltz said. "He's been forced into the deep end as far as matchups go, and he's been really good. He's a coach's dream. A lot of untapped offensive potential there."

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2026-27

4

LUKAS CORMIER

D, 22, 5-11, 190
Henderson (AHL)
injured, has not played
2020 draft, 68th overall

This should have been the year to see Cormier take another step in his development. Unfortunately a significant (but undisclosed) injury sustained in training camp has kept him on the sidelines so far this season. "He's still very much in line to be a high-end prospect," Speltz said. But a smallish defender is going to have his struggles against bigger forwards. The question is whether he can do enough to become a bottom-pairing guy at the NHL level – one who can be a PP specialist without being a liability at 5-on-5.

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

5

PAVEL MOYSEVICH

G, 20, 6-4, 187
St. Petersburg (KHL)
6-8-0, 3.34, .899
2024 draft, 83rd overall

If Moysevich were playing in North America, he'd likely be ranked higher on this list. But with the massive netminder playing in Russia, tracking his progress is more difficult. That said, those who have had good looks love what they see and believe he's ahead of similar prospects his age. The Knights need to sign Moysevich before getting him fully into the mix. If that happens, they've got a potential No. 1 goalie with a long list of attributes such as athleticism, sound positioning and making clutch saves in big moments.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2028-29

6

ARTTU KARKI

D, 20, 6-2, 176
Assat (Fin.)
40–3–10–13–8
2023 draft, 96th overall

He's moved up a level, going from OHL last year to playing pro in his home country.

7

MATHIEU CATAFORD

C, 19, 6-0, 192
Rimouski (QMJHL)
44–15–36–51–28
2023 draft, 77th overall

Quiet WJC, but middle-six potential shining through after June trade to top 'Q' club.

8

AKIRA SCHMID

G, 24, 6-5, 190
Henderson (AHL)
7-16-1, 3.56, .890
Trade (NJ), June 29, 2024

Plenty of NHL experience already. Still time to prove he can lock down a backup role.

9

TUOMAS URONEN

RW, 19, 6-0, 194
Kingston (OHL)
48–31–40–71–25
2023 draft, 192nd overall

High-level smarts and slick skills. Likes to create below goal line. Breakout OHL year.

10

CAMERON WHITEHEAD

G, 21, 6-3, 185
Northeastern (HE)
9-13-3, 2.90, .905
2022 draft, 128th overall

Has size and athleticism, but longer-term project has work to do in significant areas.

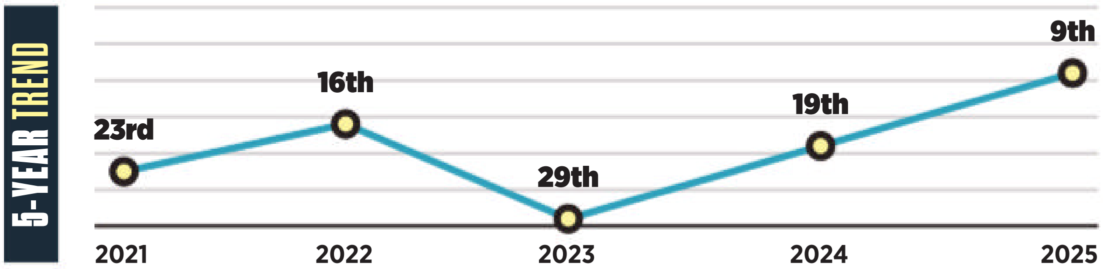
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

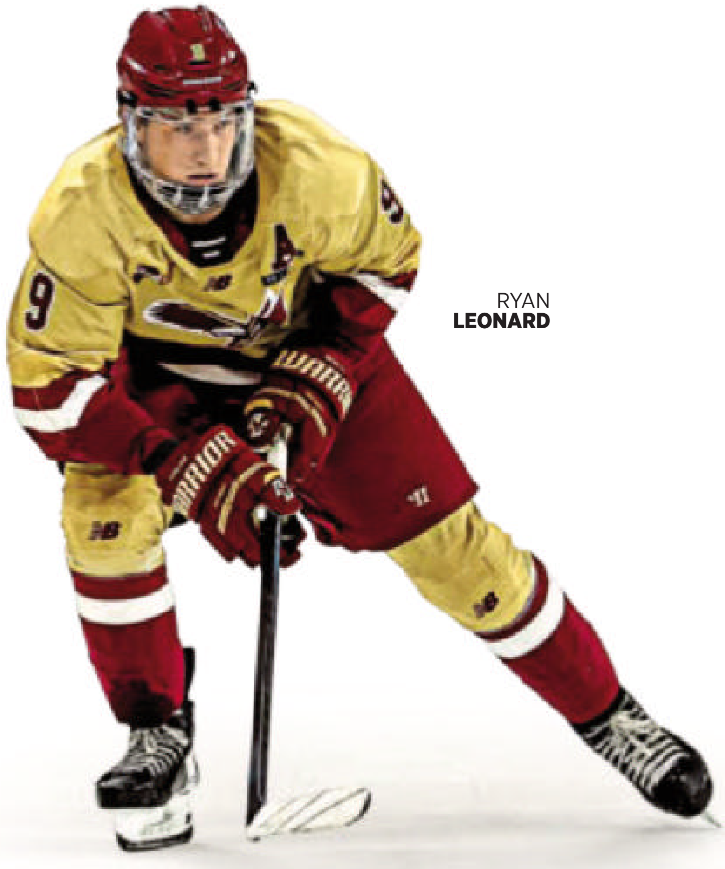
BRIAN FOLEY/PROVIDENCE COLLEGE ATHLETICS

B+ | RANK: 9TH | NHL

WASHINGTON CAPITALS

THE CAPITALS ARE CONTENDERS again, and it didn't come at the expense of their prospect pool. Rather, they've been able to retool on the fly. Since March 2023, Washington has acquired 11 draft picks via trade, some of which were later flipped for young NHLers or prospects. Last year's draft was the Caps' first in 16 years with five picks in the top 100. A younger roster now surrounds Alex Ovechkin, with pipeline graduates Connor McMichael and Aliaksei Protas emerging as 20-goal scorers. More youth is on the way, with an expected spring debut for Ryan Leonard. The Caps' turnaround could become an anti-tanking model. **BY BEN RABY**




RYAN **LEONARD**

1

RYAN LEONARD

RW, 20, 6-0, 200
Boston College (HE)
29–25–14–39–32
2023 draft, 8th overall

OVERALL 2

Embracing the role of the villain at the WJC, Leonard ultimately got the last laugh. The tournament MVP had five goals and 10 points in seven games, captaining Team USA to a second straight gold medal. A power forward with tremendous speed, Leonard is a scorer who plays with an edge. About the only thing left on his amateur to-do list is win an NCAA championship. "His shot is wicked," said Caps assistant GM Ross Mahoney, "yet he's unselfish and moves the puck really well."

FW24 | No. 1 **NHL** | 2025-26

2

IVAN MIROSHNICHENKO

LW, 21, 6-0, 192
Hershey (AHL)
29–12–12–24–12
2022 draft, 20th overall

OVERALL 43

Now in his second year in North America, Miroshnichenko had an NHL cameo this season with limited minutes. But he's playing a starring role in the AHL. A natural scorer, he was a catalyst for Hershey during last year's Calder Cup run. The Caps love his shot and Ovechkin-like one-timer from the left faceoff circle. His physical play needs to improve, but the strength he's put on since a Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosis in 2022 "speaks to his character and determination," Mahoney said.

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2025-26

3

COLE HUTSON

D, 18, 5-11, 171
Boston University (HE)
28–8–21–29–54
2024 draft, 43rd overall

OVERALL 62

Hutson was the first 'D' ever to outright lead the WJC in scoring (11 points in seven games). A mobile puck-mover with the ability to read and react, Hutson brings a healthy swagger. "His vision is up there with the best I've ever seen," Mahoney said. As a BU freshman, Hutson quarterbacks the power play and has been trusted to protect late leads. He needs to bulk up, but, "he's not afraid to stick his nose in there," Mahoney said. "He's very competitive. It's what makes him special."

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

4

ANDREW CRISTALL

LW, 20, 5-10, 183
Spokane (WHL)
43–37–64–101–32
2023 draft, 40th overall

OVERALL 100

Cristall got a long look in training camp and tied for the lead in pre-season scoring for the Caps. And he's kept it up back in the WHL as he vies for the league's scoring title. Cristall was dealt from Kelowna to Spokane in January, and he's fit in seamlessly with Kraken pick Berkly Catton. Cristall brings skill, vision and an ability to find soft spots in the O-zone. An undersized winger, he has made a concerted effort to add strength. Mahoney says that's helped his skating – an area he could still improve.

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2026-27

5

TERIK PARASCAK

RW, 18, 6-0, 180
Prince George (WHL)
49–22–46–68–37
2024 draft, 17th overall

Parascak is neither the biggest nor the fastest player, but he makes up for it in smarts and an ability to finish. "A very intelligent player," Mahoney said. "Really good hands. Plays first power play, first penalty kill, and he's a leader on a really good team." The Capitals are high on Parascak's shot release and his knack for tip-ins. The WHL's leading scorer among rookies last season, Parascak is comfortable atop the crease, though added strength would aid in 1-on-1 battles. His skating also remains a work in progress.

FW24 | new **NHL** | 2027-28

6

ILYA PROTAS

LW, 18, 6-5, 200
Windsor (OHL)
48–36–48–84–28
2024 draft, 75th overall

Power forward with good hands and long reach. Brother Aliaksei a Caps budding star.

7

VINCENT IORIO

D, 22, 6-4, 205
Hershey (AHL)
44–3–10–13–21
2021 draft, 55th overall

Key cog on one of AHL's better PK teams. Solid defensively with good stick.

8

ERIKS MATEIKO

LW, 19, 6-6, 209
Rimouski (QMJHL)
38–22–10–32–20
2024 draft, 90th overall

Good shot and plays heavy game. Starred in Latvia's WJC win over Canada.

9

LEON MUGGLI

D, 18, 6-0, 165
Zug (Sui.)
35–4–6–10–43
2024 draft, 52nd overall

Two-way 'D' with smart, mature game. Handling himself well in top Swiss league.

10

RYAN CHESLEY

D, 21, 6-1, 205
Minnesota (Big Ten)
32–7–11–18–31
2022 draft, 37th overall

Trustworthy blueliner plays rugged game. Ideal partner for puck-moving defenseman.

PHOTO BY BOSTON COLLEGE ATHLETICS

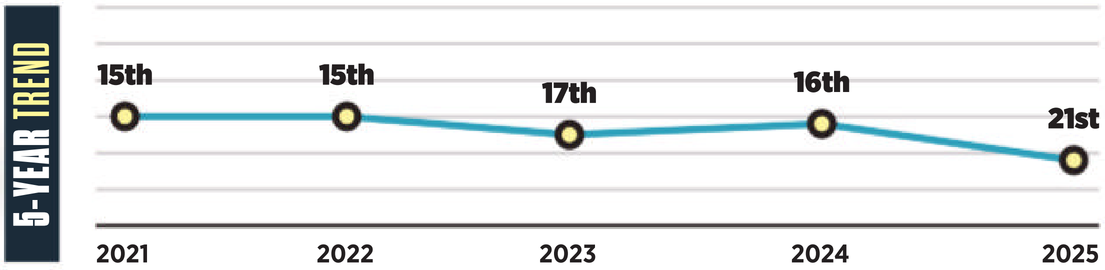
21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

NHL C+ | RANK: 21ST

WINNIPEG JETS

BRAYDEN **YAGER**

ROADBLOCKS AREN'T JUST A fixture during Winnipeg summers, they also exist during the Jets' season. Given the team's title aspirations and veteran-laden lineup, serious obstacles stand in the way of youth seeking to break through. But Jets director of player development Jimmy Roy sees it as a positive if Winnipeg's top prospects hunger to take minutes off of established big-league talent. "Any young player, you want to be in the NHL right now, and if you don't compare yourself to those players that are there, then you're far off," Roy said. "That's what you need to do with your mindset." **BY JARED CLINTON**



1

BRAYDEN YAGER

C, 20, 6-0, 170
Lethbridge (WHL)
41–23–44–67–18
Trade (Pit), Aug. 22, 2024

Wearing the 'C' at the WJC was a signifier of Yager's experience but also came with expectations: he was to be relied upon for offense. Despite logging the second-most ice time among Canadian forwards, though, he had just three points in five WJC games. But the Jets believe it's only a blip for Yager, who was acquired from Pittsburgh in a swap for Rutger McGroarty. Yager's gifts have long been apparent, and Winnipeg is high on his ability to find open ice and create space.

OVERALL 23

FW24 | 1 (Pit) **NHL** | 2026-27

2

BRAD LAMBERT

C, 21, 6-2, 180
Manitoba (AHL)
35–3–17–20–16
2022 draft, 30th overall

After Lambert had 55 points in the AHL last season, his decline in production will worry some, but not the Jets' brass. He had a one-game taste of the NHL last season and earned another four-game call-up this year. He is working to improve the finer details of his game. Given his one-time standing as a projected top-five pick, there was never doubt about his offense. The elements he's working on – like competing for pucks and using his strength – put him on a path to regular NHL duty.

OVERALL 78

FW24 | No. 4 **NHL** | 2025-26

3

NIKITA CHIBRIKOV

RW, 22, 5-11, 193
Manitoba (AHL)
30–7–11–18–10
2021 draft, 50th overall

Chibrikov wowed in Manitoba last year with an unexpected 47-point output as an AHL rookie. That helped him make his NHL debut last season, where he scored his first big-league goal. Chibrikov again turned heads with two goals during a four-game stint with the Jets in December. Roy expects the energetic and enthusiastic Chibrikov to force himself into the Jets' lineup. "He plays hard," Roy said. "Has a good shot. He's got good vision, skill. He's going to be an NHL player one day."

OVERALL 80

FW24 | No. 3 **NHL** | 2025-26

4

COLBY BARLOW

LW, 20, 6-1, 190
Oshawa (OHL)
50–29–22–51–33
2023 draft, 18th overall

Barlow's pure goal-scoring ability, which starts with a heavy and accurate shot, leaps off the page. He's backed it up with consecutive 40-goal seasons in the OHL, too, and the transferability of his offensive instincts was evident in his three-point cameo with the AHL's Moose last season. The Jets like Barlow's competitiveness and leadership qualities, which "pulls players into the fight," said Roy. And the Jets were also encouraged by his work to improve his skating and conditioning.

OVERALL 81

FW24 | No. 2 **NHL** | 2026-27

5

ELIAS SALOMONSSON

D, 20, 6-2, 189
Manitoba (AHL)
25–3–12–15–14
2022 draft, 55th overall

Injuries have hindered Salomonsson's first AHL campaign, but there have been glimpses of the tremendous upside he possesses. His shot, both in power and precision, is a useful tool, but his best asset remains his skating. He moves about the ice with such ease and gracefulness that, given room, he can act as a one-man defensive-zone escape artist. What will get him to the next level? "Doing things at a little higher pace," Roy said. "He's growing and understanding the physicality and strength needed to play in the (NHL)."

FW24 | No. 7 **NHL** | 2027-28

6

ALFONS FREIJ

D, 19, 6-1, 187
Bjorkloven (Swe.2)
28–2–6–8–12
2024 draft, 37th overall

Puck-moving blueliner with good shot needs to get stronger on his skates.

7

CHAZ LUCIUS

C, 21, 6-2, 185
Manitoba (AHL)
25–3–6–9–6
2021 draft, 18th overall

Talent is evident, but he needs game time. Injuries have cost him dearly.

8

KEVIN HE

LW, 18, 6-0, 180
Niagara (OHL)
48–27–33–60–24
2024 draft, 109th overall

Great combination of skill and work ethic. Named Niagara captain this season.

9

KIERON WALTON

LW, 18, 6-6, 216
Sudbury (OHL)
52–32–47–79–32
2024 draft, 187th overall

Has the frame of a throw-back power forward and skill set of a deft playmaker.

10

JACOB JULIEN

C, 20, 6-4, 190
London (OHL)
50–10–28–38–36
2023 draft, 146th overall

Builds from own zone outward, even if that means sacrificing offense.

21-AND-UNDER NHLERS | NONE

ERICA PERREAUX/LETHBRIDGE HURRICANES

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH
The 14,018 fans at the Takeover Tour in Denver was a U.S. record for a pro women's hockey game.

PWHL

GROWTH POTENTIAL

As the 2024 draft class has demonstrated, there's plenty of talent to fill out additional PWHL teams. Expansion will happen someday. The questions are just when and where **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

WHEN THE PWHL BUILT its inaugural six franchises, each team signed three franchise players as free agents and then filled out their rosters through the 15-round draft held in Toronto in September 2023.

Less than nine months later, the 2024 draft was held in St. Paul, Minn. And after players worldwide saw that the PWHL had delivered on its promise to build a truly professional league, 167 declared for the 42 available draft spots.

The players ranged in age from 18 to 40, including 61 NCAA players, 35 from Canadian universities and 55 from professional leagues around the world. Forty-two players from 19 countries, including 2022 Canadian gold medallist Claire Thompson, had experience on senior national teams.

Clearly, the supply of hopefuls vastly outpaced the available opportunities. And the prospects' talent levels were ready for prime time. By the midpoint of Season 2 in early February, 38 of the 42 players drafted in 2024 had appeared in at least one PWHL game, and most were playing regularly. A handful of undrafted players had also carved out lineup spots after signing as free agents.

For every new player who came in, an incumbent was knocked out – to teams' reserve lists or, in some cases, to overseas leagues.

With the prospect pool for women's hockey overflowing, observers started to wonder – could PWHL expansion happen sooner rather than later? The answer, as it turned out, was "maybe." The league has taken a measured approach to exploring its growth potential but hasn't shied away from the idea of potential expansion.

More than a month before Season 2 kicked off at the end of November, the PWHL opened the door to proposals for potential partnerships from more than 20 markets across Canada and the U.S., with the thought of potentially adding up to two new teams. In mid-November, plans were unveiled for the ambitious nine-city Takeover Tour, intended to introduce the live product to new fan bases and to test the waters in markets as far afield as Seattle, Vancouver and Raleigh, N.C.

When the tour got underway, the league's hockey-operations boss, Jayna Hefford, and business-ops head, Amy Scheer, joined the travelling road show to meet with potential expansion partners and spread the word to fans in each city. "We're excited about the growth opportunities and spreading a bit further from where we're currently located," said Hefford in Vancouver in early January. "But at the same time, we have to make sure it's the right move, the right markets, the right partners, right venues."

JAYNA **HEFFORD**

The PWHL hasn't publicly shared details about the local groups who have pitched them as potential partners. "There were a lot of markets that wanted a game that, unfortunately, we had to disappoint," Scheer said. "We wanted to pick the markets we were confident in, and if we decide to do this again next year, we'll have a full slate of additional markets to go to."

After the PWHL played neutral-site games in Pittsburgh and Detroit in Year 1, this

TOP: PHOTO BY PWHL; HEFFORD: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

ZONE
AEROPLAN

FILLING THE VOID
With no NHL return on the horizon, Quebec City would surely welcome a PWHL expansion franchise.

year's Takeover Tour hits eight NHL markets and Quebec City, which has an NHL-caliber rink and would love to have another anchor tenant join the QMJHL's Quebec Remparts. To compare the key metrics for each potential expansion market, Scheer explained that the league has built a model that assigns a numeric score to each element and weights its importance.

Some of the details being assessed are the availability and suitability of an arena and practice facility, the feasibility of travel, the robustness of the local ecosystem for girls' hockey and the availability of ice time for youth players and programs. Finally, there's the economic opportunity for the league.

While the PWHL's ownership has shouldered a significant financial burden to get the league through its start-up phase, they're running a business with the expectation that it will become profitable within a reasonable time frame. In addition to delivering tickets to paying fans, a strong expansion market offers other revenue-generating partnership opportunities.

CLIMATE PLEDGE ARENA
PWHL

Putting teams in western markets – such as Seattle – has both pros and cons for the PWHL.

PHOTOS BY PWHL

But some of those "want to haves" will run counter to each other. Travel gets tougher if the league sets up shop out west, especially since teams fly commercial except in special circumstances. On the other hand, there's a strong business advantage to establishing a permanent coast-to-coast footprint, with broadcast partners and league sponsors eager to tap into true national audiences on both sides of the border.

One thing the PWHL doesn't require is an ownership group offering up an expansion fee and managing a franchise's day-to-day operations, like we've seen with the NHL in Vegas and Seattle. The PWHL and its six teams are owned by a single entity, the Mark Walter Group. The intention is for that structure to remain in place for the foreseeable future, even if the league chooses to expand.

And while the landscape for expansion looks good, there's no guarantee that more teams will be added imminently. "We've been very clear that we may expand or we may not," Scheer said. "We're doing all of the due diligence, but I don't think for us it's about striking while the iron is hot. It's making a very educated decision based on everything that we'll learn during the RFP process."

Hefford expects to see another significant influx of talent from college and beyond to seek their PWHL opportunities in the summer of 2025. "This most recent draft was incredibly deep," she said. "There were more players than could be drafted, and we expect that again in the upcoming season. It's another, we call it, double cohort, coming out of the COVID years, a really strong, deep draft."

And that talent won't just come out of colleges. "We're still attracting some of the best players from around the world to our league," Hefford said. "They may be a bit more mature and coming from leagues around the world."

Outside of the Olympics, the NCAA has long been considered the pinnacle of the women's hockey experience. U.S. colleges offer first-class facilities and player support. The PWHL's high operating standard is starting to challenge that mindset. But while NCAA men's basketball players are often one-and-done and many men's hockey players turn pro before using up their eligibility, Hefford isn't expecting top college players on the women's side to cut their college days short – yet. "As a hockey player, when you have an opportunity to watch this league and see how special it is, obviously the best league in the world, I can see why somebody would strive to do that," she said. "But at this point, I don't think it's immediate."

It may or may not happen in the fall, but PWHL expansion is inevitable at some point. When it does happen, the opportunities will extend beyond the players on the ice. Expansion will also deliver new openings for coaches, managers and support staffers who work behind the scenes – in and around the dressing room, on the business side and in adjacent areas like arena operations, media and broadcasting.

EMIGRATE-NESS
Without a women's league in Czechia, Prague native Sapovalivova left home at 17 to play for Modo in Sweden.

HOW SWEDE IT IS

The SDHL is playing an integral role in developing prospects and in the overall growth of the international game, but it raises the question: when will other countries step up? **BY IAN KENNEDY**

IN MEN'S HOCKEY, there are many well-defined routes to the NHL in North America and Europe. At the 2024 NHL draft, players from more than 30 different leagues and 13 nations were selected. In women's hockey, however, development pathways remain vastly unequal from nation to nation, and the path to the PWHL is narrow.

Only the NCAA and Swedish Women's League (SDHL) have emerged as legitimate routes to the PWHL. While these leagues are feeding the PWHL, they are also paramount in closing the gap in international competition between Canada, the U.S. and the rest of the world. In many ways, the SDHL and NCAA are playing a more important role than the PWHL in levelling the international playing field in women's hockey.

This season, the PWHL features national-team players from nine nations, while the SDHL has national-team players from 13 countries and the NCAA from 17. In the 35-year history of the women's World Championship, only Canada and the U.S. have won gold. If that is to change, it'll be through the collaborative efforts of the SDHL, NCAA and PWHL.

Peter Elander – who was the associate coach for last season's national-champion Ohio State Buckeyes and this year is the coach of SDE in the SDHL – has witnessed the value of both leagues in the global development of women's hockey firsthand. Elander has coached in both leagues and at the Olympics and World Championship with Sweden and Denmark.

For European teenagers, the SDHL is often the last stop before the NCAA, and for players needing extra development following the NCAA, the SDHL is another stop before the PWHL.

HILDA **SVENSSON**

PETER **ELANDER**

"The SDHL is the best development league for players aiming to go to top NCAA programs, and the league has young talents in those programs," Elander said. "In my opinion, this is the key for closing the gap between North America and Europe."

Elander believes young European players such as Hilda Svensson, Jenna Raunio, Adela Sapovalivova and Tereza Plosova – all of whom currently play in the SDHL and all of whom are headed to the NCAA – and current NCAA and past SDHL standout Mira Jungaker will all be just as PWHL-ready as North American prospects like Jocelyn Amos, who captained Canada's national development team this season, and American senior national-team member Joy Dunne, who both play for Ohio State this season.

Much of that comes from Sweden's willingness to put money and resources into their women's programs, and the evolution of rules, including the re-introduction of bodychecking in 2022, to make players coming from the loop more competitive on the global stage. It's a plan that is rapidly paying off, not only for Sweden but for other European nations sending players to the SDHL.

Kim Martin Hasson, a 2008 first-team All-American with the University of Minnesota-Duluth and an Olympic all-star for Sweden, agrees. Martin Hasson, who is now the GM of SDHL Frolunda (a team featuring national-team standouts from Finland, Sweden and Norway and 2024 PWHL champion Sydney Brodt), sees the benefit of Sweden's investment as a positive feedback loop for the sport. "If you look

PHOTOS BY PATRIC GILL/CIRTAP.SE

ELANDER OF OPPORTUNITY
Few know the intricacies of the SDHL-NCAA loop better than Elander, who has coached in both leagues.

at the Swedish League, more clubs are giving better resources and are more professional than just a few years ago," she said. "More players can live off hockey. This, in turn, helps the players to focus more on hockey and recovery. I think especially that there are a lot of younger players coming up that are really good. I also think that other nations are putting a lot more into their women's program."

NCAA coaches such as Colgate's Stefan Decosse have noticed the impact the SDHL is having. It's why his program will replace its top scorer, Czech national-team member and probable 2025 PWHL first-rounder Kristyna Kaltounkova, with Czechia's U-18 national-team captain Linda Vocetkova, who is in her second season with Djurgarden in the SDHL. "With its professional coaching and facilities and consistently high-level competition, (the SDHL) has become fertile ground for aspiring young European players to continue to develop and refine their skills prior to heading over to the NCAA," Decosse said.

TEREZA PLOSOVA

But there remains work to be done outside Sweden. As Elander stated, the rest of the world are passive beneficiaries of the NCAA and SDHL. Governing bodies across the globe have yet to build infrastructure for women and girls in hockey. In nations like Czechia and Slovakia, who are contenders in men's hockey, there are no competitive leagues for girls or women. The top girls play in boys' leagues before leaving home as young teenagers for prep programs in North America or the SDHL. Slovak phenom Nela Lopusanova, who will play NCAA hockey for Wisconsin, suited up for American prep school Bishop Kearney. Czech national-team members Sapovalivova, who is also headed to Wisconsin, and University of Minnesota commit Plosova both left home for the SDHL as 17-year-olds.

Ivo Mocek, a Czech native who has coached professional women's hockey in North America and Asia, notes the impact of this development gap and the importance of the NCAA and SDHL in filling that void. "When it comes to the girls' hockey development in Czechia, there is sadly not much to talk about," Mocek said. "There is no girls-only league nor teams. Young girls are playing on a boys' team until they're old enough or good enough to play in the women's league. This is not good, because as soon as a player reaches a certain age and skill level, they leave to Sweden or Finland, where they can develop with proper training and game schedule and hope they will get recruited to the NCAA."

Mocek calls it a miracle that Czechia has won bronze medals at two of the past three world championships with no competitive league for women or girls. As Elander stated, nations like Czechia benefit from Sweden's investments, but it's a nonreciprocal relationship that other European nations must address to continue moving forward. "With a league as strong as the SDHL, all players that get regular ice time will develop," Elander said. "It doesn't matter if it's a Swedish 17- to 20-year-old, Czech, Danish or Norwegian player, but there are some problems in this. The question is, should Swedish ice hockey develop other countries' national-team players? A league of SDHL's quality is dependent on players from abroad, but with no financial impact, why develop other countries' players?"

MIRA JUNGAKER

Luckily for the global game, the SDHL continues to develop players from nations across Europe and Asia. That development feeds talent to the NCAA, which continues the feedback loop, sending stronger players back to their national programs and into the PWHL.

If this less-direct-yet-successful route continues to produce elite players, a nation outside North America's powerhouse tandem may soon earn gold on the international stage. And that would be an exciting moment for the future of women's hockey. "Over the past decade, it's been remarkable to watch the talent pool from Europe expand and elevate the competition in NCAA and international women's hockey," Decosse said. "The SDHL has been a major catalyst in this growth. It's an incredibly exciting time in our sport, and the emergence of this developmental pathway has not only helped drive national-team success internationally but also raised the overall standard of women's hockey worldwide."

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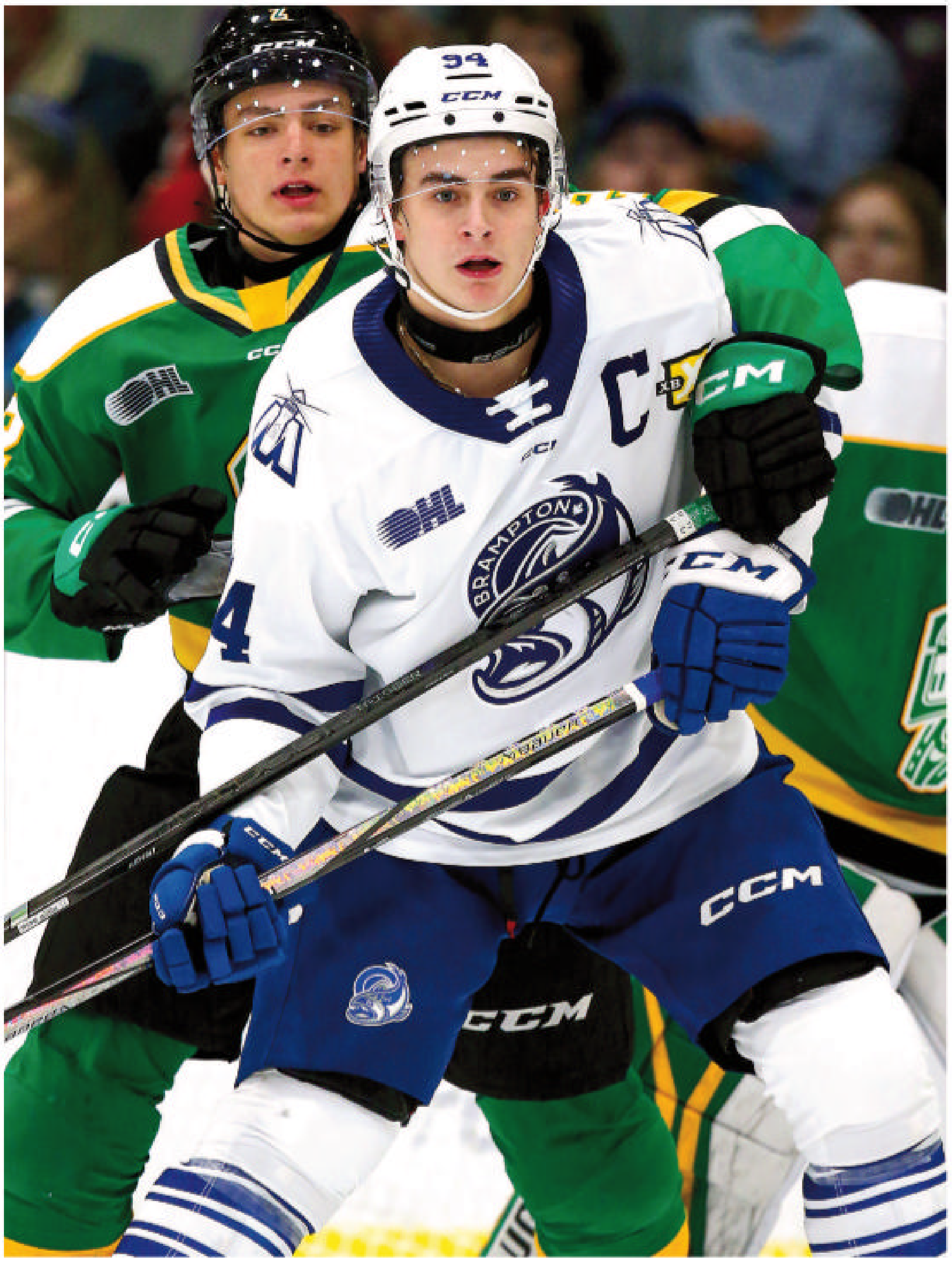


LUKE DURDA/OHL IMAGES

PORTER MARTONE

ANYTHING IT TAKES

Porter Martone can play it however you like, and that includes dropping the mitts – even if his coach prefers him not to

BY RYAN KENNEDY

THE FIRST-EVER Connor McDavid OHL Top Prospects Game was held in Brantford this year, and it was no surprise that Brampton Steelheads right winger Porter Martone made an impact.

The fact he scored the overtime-winner for Team East was already impressive, but that goal also gave him a Gordie Howe hat trick after a second-period fight and an assist on the game-tying goal in the third. That, in a nutshell, is why Martone is one of the top players available in the 2025 draft – even though Brampton coach-GM James Richmond would be more than happy if Martone kept his gloves on. “Fighting is part of the game, and there are times to do it,” Richmond said. “But how many top scorers in different leagues are also your top fighters? That’s what I’m trying to explain to him. Corey Perry was a top scorer, and he could still be an agitator. Matthew Tkachuk can still be an agitator and not fight every two or three games. If you talk to guys who fought for a living, they’ll tell you it’s painful on your hands. If you’ve got a top scorer, you want to protect his hands.”

While Martone hasn’t fought too many times this season, he’s also the type of player who steps up when his team needs a boost – no matter what that entails. “I’m a competitor, and I want to win, so I’m going to do anything I can to win,” he said. “If I have to drop the gloves, I’ll drop the gloves.”

Martone has been the Steelheads’ top scorer all season and one of the most dangerous offensive forces in the OHL. “He’s one of the best junior players of his age in the country,” Richmond said. “To have a player that dominant on your team is huge for us. His compete level is off the charts, and his skill level is off the charts.”

Martone has vision, playmaking ability and a great scoring touch to go with his big frame and physicality. It was enough to earn him a spot on Canada’s World Junior Championship team, albeit in a smaller role that bizarrely did not often put him on the same line with Brampton linemate Carson Rehkopf, the Seattle Kraken prospect. It was a disappointing tournament for the Canadians in Ottawa, with a quarterfinal exit and an ensuing firestorm about the coaching and management surrounding the team. But Martone came away from his first WJC experience with a positive attitude. “It was on home soil, and you dream of that as a little kid,” he said. “Skating out in front of 20,000 people was pretty surreal. But we did lose in the quarterfinal, and it definitely left a sour taste in everybody’s mouth. It was pretty heartbreaking, the way it ended. But the people coming back next year, we have extra motivation, and we can take those experiences and move them into next year.”

It will be interesting to see if Martone is even available next season. With his late-October birthday, he’s one of the older first-time eligible players in his draft class, and with Martone boasting a 6-foot-3, 208-pound frame, it’s not hard to picture him in the NHL next season. On top of all his offensive exploits, Martone also kills penalties, so he’s not a one-dimensional player who would have to play on a scoring line right away. He has fierce competition at the top of the draft board, but he’s also competitive when it comes to rankings. “You can never be too high,” Martone said. “I want to continue showing people the player I can be and a player that hopefully goes into an NHL system and helps build a culture to win a Stanley Cup one day.”

That culture piece also helps explain why he was named captain of the Steelheads, even though he was just 17 when the campaign began. “He’s a leader,” Richmond said. “He’s worn the ‘C’ for Team Canada (at the world under-18s, where he won gold). He wore the ‘C’ growing up, and guys gravitate to him. If we’re doing a media event or community event, they’re all looking to see what he does first. He leads on the ice. He leads off the ice. It was a pretty easy decision for all of us.”

Right now, the captain’s challenge will be to push Brampton through a playoff run. The Steelheads have had some awful injury luck this season, plus some untimely suspensions and several players who missed time due to the world juniors. If they’re going to make noise, their captain will be a big reason why. “I want to win every night, whether it’s an all-star game, regular-season game or playoff game,” Martone said. “I just want to go out and be the hardest player I can be.”

2025 PROJECTED TOP 10

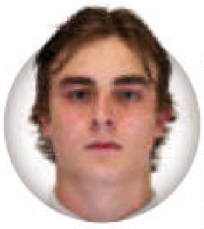
1

MATTHEW SCHAEFER

D, 6-2, 183
Erie (OHL)

It's no coincidence that Canada fell apart at the World Junior Championship after he broke his collarbone, despite the fact he was the youngest defenseman on the squad. Schaefer has everything a team would want in a blueliner: size, skating, smarts and two-way skills. At the risk of being hyperbolic, he could be the next Cale Makar.

SCOUT SAYS: "He just controls the game. He plays in all situations, and he can do it all. He's a terrific player. He has hockey sense, skill, skating, he can defend, and he can run the power play. He's a very well-rounded player."



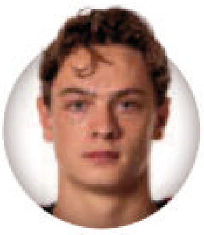
2

PORTER MARTONE

RW, 6-3, 208
Brampton (OHL)

What sets Martone apart from other top-end forwards in his class is the size and snarl he brings to each game; it's very 'Tkachuk brothers.' He's been one of the top scorers in the OHL and earned a spot on Canada's world-junior team.

SCOUT SAYS: "He's a skilled guy who can play it any way you want to. He's physical. He's hard to get away from the net, and he has great hands in close. He gets a lot of goals in a lot of different ways. He can handle it himself 1-on-1, or he can jam the net. He's a very competitive kid, and it certainly translates on the ice."



3

JAMES HAGENS

C, 5-11, 178
Boston College (HE)

Thanks to his preternatural talent, he's been on the radar for a while, and he has made the jump up to the NCAA look easy. Hagens was also a key part of Team USA's gold-medal WJC squad. Best-case scenario is Hagens becomes a Jack Hughes-type of center.

SCOUT SAYS: "He's really offensively talented and probably has the highest IQ in the draft with the way he procures offense. A true freshman at over a point per game is obviously pretty special. The IQ, the brain and the stick are real separators that have him sitting alone among Americans in the draft."

4

MICHAEL MISA

C, 6-1, 185
Saginaw (OHL)

The first player in major junior to hit the 100-point mark this season – and he did it in February. Misa came to the Spirit a year early thanks to an exceptional-status designation, and he has already won a Memorial Cup. He has a bit of bite to his game on top of all the great offensive tools.

SCOUT SAYS: "Smart player. Really skilled. He can skate, make plays and has really good vision. He shares the puck. He can score or pass, and, as a young guy, he gets the tough match-up every night. Other teams are putting their best out against him, yet he leads the league in scoring."

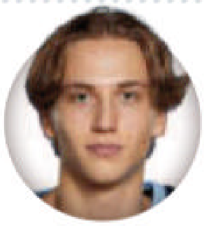
5

ANTON FRONDELL

C, 6-0, 196
Djurgarden (Swe.2)

Frondell missed most of the summer due to injury, then went on the shelf a couple of times during the first half, so it's been a roller coaster. But star turns at the World Jr. A Challenge and Five Nations revealed the game-changing type of player everyone expected. Think Leo Carlsson.

SCOUT SAYS: "It was tough for him to get into a rhythm in the first half, but he got going after Christmas. I like his approach to the game. He's big and strong and plays hard. He has a good shot, plays a smart game, and he's very team-friendly. There's a natural power to his game."



6

VICTOR EKLUND

RW, 5-11, 161
Djurgarden (Swe.2)

Eklund, the younger brother of San Jose left winger William, could eclipse his sibling in both draft stock and NHL upside. He was one of Sweden's top scorers at the world juniors, even though he was the team's youngest member. He's also the top junior-aged scorer in the Allsvenskan.

SCOUT SAYS: "He plays so hard every shift. He plays with passion, and he competes. He wants to get inside. He plays with energy, and he wants to play fast. There's a little more projection with Eklund than with Frondell in terms of when he adds weight and how his game translates at the next level."

7

CALEB DESNOYERS

C, 6-2, 173
Moncton (QMJHL)

His showing at the first-ever CHL-NTDP series had the coaches raving, describing the teen as a "man" already. He's been a consistent winner, with gold at the world under-18s and the Hlinka Gretzky Cup. Moncton could win the QMJHL this year, too.

SCOUT SAYS: "Smart, 200-foot player with really good details in his game. He's getting a ton of ice time with the best team in the league, which tells you something. Plays all situations and against top lines almost every night. I don't know if there are many guys in the draft as well-rounded as him."

8

ROGER McQUEEN

C, 6-5, 193
Brandon (WHL)

McQueen, a towering presence, has been sidelined for most of the year with a suspected back issue. Scouts will really be watching his return, especially since a similar player from last year, Cayden Lindstrom, might miss his whole campaign with a back problem. But the talent is indisputable.

SCOUT SAYS: "The first thing you notice is his size. He skates extremely well for a big guy, and he can be elusive, especially when he has the puck. He hunts down pucks, he'll drive the net, and he has a good shot. You can tell he's a leader by the way he plays, so there's character there, too."

9

JACKSON SMITH

D, 6-3, 190
Tri-City (WHL)

Smith, possibly a bit of a sleeper, has put up excellent numbers with the Americans and brings enviable size, physicality and mobility to the ice. He won gold with Canada at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup and was also part of the CHL-NTDP series. His hockey sense is solid as well.

SCOUT SAYS: "Really good size, and his skating is impressive. He's got good pivots, he's quick to puck retrievals, and he's got some physicality to his game. There's some understated offense, too. His team is doing a lot better than in the past, and that's helpful. Gets a lot of assists on the power play but also 5-on-5."

10

KASHAWN AITCHESON

D, 6-1, 198
Barrie (OHL)

Aitcheson is the type of defenseman you pray is in your lineup and not on the other team. He's an eraser in his own end, an intimidator in the corners and always game for a fight. But he has also found success offensively with the Colts this season, adding to his allure.

SCOUT SAYS: "He's a gamer. This guy is very physical. Loves to join the rush and the attack. He can be competitive and physical, or he can be active and offensive. He has a great attitude towards the game. If you go to see him, he's easy to find because he's going to be physical and in the game."

KEATON VERHOEFF

BLUE PAINT TO BLUELINE

Keaton Verhoeff got a late start as a defenseman, which makes his standing as one of the top prospects for the 2026 NHL draft all the more impressive

BY RYAN KENNEDY

KEATON VERHOEFF has all the attributes an NHL team would want in a blueliner, including the fact he's a right-handed shot. But if it weren't for inline hockey, Verhoeff wouldn't have become a highly coveted defenseman at all – in fact, he might still be a goaltender.

Verhoeff got rid of the pads and mask less than six years ago, and it all came down to impacting the game. "I was still playing goalie on my spring hockey team, but I was playing inline as a player," he said. "So, that helped my momentum in becoming a player. I've been a defenseman for five-and-a-half years now. The reason I switched was that if there was a 2-on-0 and I let in the goal as a goalie, there was nothing else I could do to impact the game, I couldn't go score a goal to tie it up. So, I felt if I played as a defenseman, I could impact the game more. But as I've grown up, I've realized you definitely need a good goalie, too."

As a rookie defenseman in the WHL, the 16-year-old Verhoeff has produced more than his fair share of offense for Victoria. With 15 goals and 37 points through 42 games, he led all Royals blueliners in points and was second in the league among rookie rearguards, behind only exceptional-status phenom Landon DuPont of Everett. This made it all the more shocking when Verhoeff's coach learned that he used to be a netminder not long ago. "I found it hilarious," said James Patrick. "We had dinner at (rookie right winger) Nolan Stewart's house when we were in Edmonton, and he and Keaton played on the same team when they were 10. Nolan's dad pulled out the team picture, and there was Keaton in his goalie pads. It really is amazing that he came to defense so much later. It's a pretty cool story."

Verhoeff, taken fourth overall by Victoria in the 2023 WHL draft, has already represented Canada at the Youth Olympic Games and this year's World U-17 Challenge, where he captained Canada White to a gold medal. "It's a big honor to have the captaincy for a team like that," Verhoeff said. "But if you look at the guys in that room, it was a bunch of leaders. They could have put the 'C' on anyone. They made my life easy, and I hope I made their life easier as well. Everyone bought in, and everyone was high-skill. Playing in that tournament was super exciting for me."

In many cases, the U-17s can offer a confidence boost for CHL rookies, who are adjusting to the bigger, faster game of major junior before the November tournament. But Verhoeff had nine points in his first 10 games this year – so, if anything, the U-17 event was just a continuation for him. He already has NHL size at 6-foot-4 and 212 pounds, and he still has plenty of development time to hone his game. The fact his coach played nearly 1,300 NHL games as a defenseman has also been a boon. "It's good to have him help me learn different defensive skill sets that I need to know as I grow up in this league and look to move on to the next level," said Verhoeff of Patrick. "We're looking at everything to keep building on. One of the things you see more and more in the NHL right now is the skating with defensemen.

KEVIN LIGHT/VICTORIA ROYALS

2026 PROJECTED TOP 10

Even the bigger guys move well and are super mobile, so every day after practice, I'm doing some sort of skating drill to make sure my feet and edgework are up to par so I can get good gaps and angles on all those high-skill players."

Patrick sees a lot of potential in Verhoeff. "The obvious is that he's 6-foot-4 and 212 pounds with very good mobility, very good hands, and he sees the ice very well," he said. "And I put him up there as being as driven and hardworking as any of the kids I've worked with. He works extremely hard every day to get better."

GORD RUFH/VICTORIA ROYALS

Patrick and assistant coach Don MacGillivray continue to work with Verhoeff on the game's finer points, such as moving the puck up the ice quickly and using teammates more in the process. Working on his reads, stick-on-stick defense and physicality have also been on the docket.

As for a return to the crease someday? Well, maybe during a practice. "I haven't done it in a while, but the guys are always telling me I should try," Verhoeff said. "I self-proclaim that I'd like to be our third-string goalie, but that's definitely not the case. The last time I tried was two years ago, and it wasn't very good."

Luckily, he has defense to fall back on.

1 GAVIN McKENNA

LW, Medicine Hat (WHL)

When you're one of the CHL's top scorers and you just turned 17, you know you're doing something right. McKenna has already made his WJC debut with Canada.

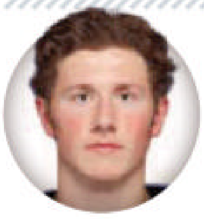
SCOUT SAYS: "He's thinking the game well before he ends up with the puck. He's got a terrific shot. He's a great skater, and he sees the ice. He checks all the boxes. He's not too far away from becoming a generational player."

2 RYAN ROOBROECK

LW, Niagara (OHL)

A top-10 goal-scorer in the OHL, Roobroeck was the No. 2 overall pick in the 2023 OHL draft. Big kid whose even bigger brother, Dylan, is a Rangers prospect.

SCOUT SAYS: "Great hands. Great shot. Elite shooter and goal-scorer who can score from anywhere, including outside the scoring areas because he can zing it. Real good offensive instincts and protects pucks well."



3 KEATON VERHOEFF

D, Victoria (WHL)

The Royals have never had a top-10 NHL pick, but Verhoeff could easily snap that streak. He captained Canada White to gold at the World U-17 Challenge.

SCOUT SAYS: "He's big and strong, and he skates well. Has everything you want in a defenseman. Has a little bit of physicality but also a lot of high-end skill. Moves the puck quickly, and he's good on the power play."

4 ETHAN BELCHETZ

LW, Windsor (OHL)

At 6-foot-5 and 226 pounds, Belchetz isn't just one of the CHL's biggest players, he'd be one of the NHL's bigger players. Top pick in the 2024 OHL draft.

SCOUT SAYS: "Big, strong, powerful kid with good hands and a good shot. He was dominant at the world under-17s. He can take the puck wherever he wants to go. Real good down low and has good hands for a big guy."

5 COLIN FITZGERALD

C, Peterborough (OHL)

While the Petes have been the OHL's worst team, Fitzgerald has been a rookie standout and the team's leading scorer. He also played lacrosse growing up.

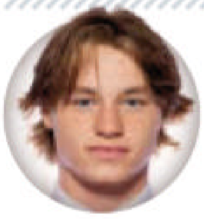
SCOUT SAYS: "Real complete player. He's not on a team that scores a lot, and he still manages to get points. He can play in any type of game. He's competitive. He's big and skilled, and he's a good character kid."

6 IVAR STENBERG

LW, Frolunda (Swe.)

The younger brother of St. Louis Blues pick Otto Stenberg, Ivar is already in the SHL after dominating the Hlinka Gretzky Cup and the World Jr. A Challenge.

SCOUT SAYS: "He's more skilled than his brother; there's more natural skill there. He's a smooth skater with great offensive instincts. He just makes things happen out there. He's a very good offensive player."

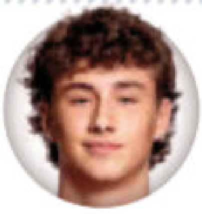


7 BRAIDY WASSILYN

C, Niagara (OHL)

Wassilyn has been one of the top-producing 2008-born players in the OHL. A big goal-scorer at the U-16 level, he's found his playmaking ability with the IceDogs.

SCOUT SAYS: "He's really skilled. He's quick and 'darty.' He gets open and makes plays. He wants to have the puck. He wants to make plays. The puck seems to follow him, and he's engaged in the offense."



8 MADDOX DAGENAIS

C, Quebec (QMJHL)

Dagenais got off to a hot start that saw him put up comparable rookie numbers to Crosby and MacKinnon, but a concussion sidelined him in November.

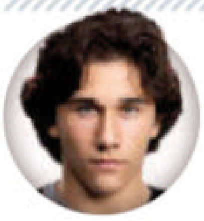
SCOUT SAYS: "I loved him early on. It's too bad he got injured when he did. Maddox is a good player and a 200-foot guy who makes plays and really gets involved. I really liked him when I saw him this season."

9 VIGGO BJORCK

RW, Djurgarden Jr. (Swe.)

Bjorck is incredibly talented and has already been on the radar for the past couple of years after dominating at whatever junior level he was playing.

SCOUT SAYS: "He thinks the game at a very high level, with and without the puck. He makes others better. His hockey sense is excellent. Not a big guy, but he's strong on the puck. He's a small guy that doesn't play small."



10 ADAM VALENTINI

C, Chicago (USHL)

Valentini tied for the scoring lead at the world under-17s. He's the latest Toronto product to play for the Steel before heading to the University of Michigan.

SCOUT SAYS: "Really smart. Really instinctive. Really good stick. He's a playmaker and driver. Looked even better at the U-17s than in the USHL. His game is offense: his brain, his stick, his anticipation."

CHARLIE MURATA

ANGLING FOR GREATNESS

Charlie Murata is already battling his dad for YouTube supremacy, and someday soon, he'll be fighting for the top spot on NHL draft boards

BY RYAN KENNEDY

SEARCH FOR "Murata" on YouTube and you'll get some hits for Charlie Murata – but you'll also get a bunch for his dad, the fishing ace Taro Murata. Taro's videos are well-known in angling circles, and with Charlie making a name for himself in the hockey world, there could be a great competition for virality from here on out.

The younger Murata is a potential No. 1 pick in the OHL draft this year. He's been carving up the U-16 Greater Toronto League with the juggernaut Don Mills Flyers, the same program responsible for Mitch Marner, Shane Wright, Brandt Clarke and many others. "He's a dynamic skater, and he can control the pace of his game with his skating," said one scout. "And he's not just trying to skate around everybody. He can slow the game down. He can speed it up. He can make plays and score goals. For a younger kid, he has some detail in his game."

Unlike his predecessors, the 16-year-old Murata will benefit from the new open relationship between the NCAA and CHL. If he wants to go the college route, he doesn't have to avoid major junior anymore, and he could very well play in both circuits when all is said and done. "It's the best of both worlds, and it's really exciting," Murata said. "I'm keeping my options open, and whichever program fits best for me, that's where I'm going to go."

Wherever he ends up, he's going to be popular with his linemates thanks to his playmaking vision. It's a part of his game that he takes pride in and sees as a strength. "I use my teammates well," he said. "Obviously, on Don Mills, we have a bunch of really good players. I use my feet, my speed and my IQ to score goals."

Murata is a big fan of Winnipeg's Kyle Connor and appreciates the Jets winger for his speed, skill and commitment to being hard on pucks. For Murata, improving on the defensive aspects of the game is important. "Right now, I want to work on my off-puck play," he said. "Being able to play on both sides of the puck, stopping and starting on pucks, getting sticks in lanes and maybe bringing a bit more physicality."

And while Murata is making a name for himself on the ice, he has enjoyed growing up in a household where getting out on the water is such a big part of his dad's life. "Lots of fishing; lots of fishing talk," he said. "I go fishing with him, so that's cool. He's got a personality, and I love him. It's been really good growing up with him."

There are even lessons to learn in the boat for an aspiring puck star. "In fishing, you have to be really patient," Murata said. "Sometimes, you can get frustrated if things aren't going your way, and that kind of translates to hockey. If things aren't going your way and the puck's not bouncing your way, be patient, and it will come."

Charlie Murata's best haul on the water has been a 30-inch tiger muskie. This spring, OHL teams will get their chance to hook him into one of their organizations when the draft comes around. And they're hoping he can bring a trophy or two to town in the coming years. H

THREE PLAYERS TO WATCH

LANDON DUPONT

D, Everett (WHL)

The latest CHLer to get exceptional status, DuPont is making the WHL look very smart, as he has been one of the league's top-scoring D-men. Projected No. 1 in 2027.

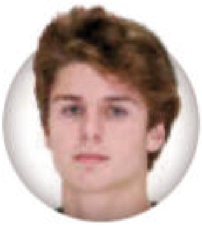
SCOUT SAYS: "His skating ability is by far the best I've ever seen at that age. He has so much knowledge, too. His skating, his skill, his patience with the puck. He has a lot of poise to his game."

MAX PENKIN

C, Mannheim Jr. (Ger.)

The first player to get exceptional status in Germany's junior league, Penkin is the type of scorer who wills his team back into games and shows high compete.

SCOUT SAYS: "Not in the same category as Leon Draisaitl or Tim Stutzle at the same age, but not far off, either. Has an impressive ability to drive offensive plays with his pace and vision."



FREDDIE SCHNEIDER

C, Edina (USHS)

It's rare for a freshman to make an impact on a top varsity squad in Minnesota, but Schneider did just that last year. Portland owns his WHL draft rights.

SCOUT SAYS: "Electric, dynamic center who is lightning on ice and has the highest upside of any Minnesota '09 (birthday). A lock for the NTDP. He's the kind of player I would sell my soul for."

MAX LEWIS/GTHL

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Point surprised prognosticators by becoming one of the league's top talents.

NHL

POINT-LESS ENDEAVOR

While we had plenty of top prospects pegged properly, we totally whiffed on a Lightning star and his teammate

BY JARED CLINTON

DEVELOPMENT ISN'T LINEAR, or so they say, and for that we should perhaps be thankful.

If we had we undertaken this five- and 10-year retrospective of past Future Watch editions half a decade ago, a mea culpa on behalf of our 13-person panel of NHL scouts and GMs would have been in order. That's because in 2020, five years after Leon Draisaitl was ranked as the NHL's third-best prospect, the Edmonton Oilers pivot was en route to winning the Art Ross Trophy, Hart Trophy and Ted Lindsay Award on the strength of a 43-goal, 110-point campaign.

What would have made that ranking especially egregious five years ago, though, is not just that it was the second of Draisaitl's truly dominant seasons but that it happened to come in the same year that Sam Reinhart and Sam Bennett, the two players ahead of Draisaitl on the 2015 Top 50, registered 30 goals and 62 points – combined. But if not entirely kind to those rankings, time has provided us with a new prism through which to view them.

Yes, last June, Reinhart and Bennett played key roles in helping the Florida Panthers win the 2024 Stanley Cup, eking by Draisaitl's Oilers in the final. But beyond the gaudy jewellery they can lord over Draisaitl, the pair of Panthers have come into their own. For his part, Bennett has become invaluable as a middle-six pivot and pest extraordinaire, while Reinhart has had an especially exceptional rise.

As of early February, Reinhart had scored more goals than all but seven players since puck drop in 2021-22. And the perception he was an offensive dynamo in need of defensive refinement has proven laughable. Reinhart finished fourth in Selke Trophy voting in 2023-24, was leading the league in shorthanded goals in 2024-25 and was tied for the third-most shorthanded points since becoming a Panther.

Here is where we must admit, however, that while ranking Draisaitl anything other than No. 1 might appear to be the greatest misjudgment our panel made in 2015, the biggest whiff is concealed by virtue of this retrospective focusing solely on the top 50 prospects. The reason being is it obscures the fact Brayden Point ranked 10th among Tampa Bay Lightning prospects in 2015 and was thus unranked in the overall top 50.

Noted at the time as a "surprise" inclusion on Team Canada's 2015 World Junior Championship roster, it's forgivable that Point slotted behind future NHLers Andrei Vasilevskiy, Tony DeAngelo and Vladislav Namestnikov. But that Point sat behind Nikita Nesterov, Dominik Masin and Adam Wilcox is a bit harder to swallow. In fairness, few foresaw Point breaking into the NHL by 2016-17, and fewer yet fathomed he would become, to date, the third-highest-scoring player from the 2014 draft and the 20th-highest-scoring player in the entire NHL since his debut.

Coincidentally, one of Point's teammates was also overlooked five years later. In our 2020 Future Watch rankings, Brandon Hagel was rated eighth among Chicago Blackhawks prospects. It's a testament to Hagel's late-bloomer, diamond-in-the-rough status that he has risen to become the 10th-highest scoring forward from

LEON DRAISAITL

POINT: JAMES CAREY LAUDER-IMAGN IMAGES; DRAISAITL: PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

the 2016 draft class, a first-liner in Tampa Bay and was named to Team Canada for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

If anything stands out about the 2020 cohort, though, it's the sheer volume of goaltending talent. New York Rangers keeper Igor Shesterkin ranked third among all prospects, a position he has more than justified with one Vezina Trophy, two top-five finishes and a third-place Hart Trophy finish. Meanwhile, New York rival Ilya Sorokin has cemented his place as the Islanders' No. 1 on the strength of three top-10 Vezina finishes, proving himself well worthy of his No. 22 ranking. Ahead of Sorokin sat the fifth-ranked Spencer Knight, while Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was slotted at 41st overall. Though neither has reached Sorokin's heights, their respective futures seem bright. And this is to say nothing of Jeremy Swayman, Dustin Wolf, Lukas Dostal or Joseph Woll, all of whom appeared on their current clubs' team-based rankings.

IGOR **SHESTERKIN**

SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

The order of the goalies will produce quibbles, but the ranking of individuals is less noticeable in hindsight than the modest upside given to the Minnesota Wild's pool, which ranked 24th but has produced two of the best players from the entire crop.

Ranked fourth – and up from eighth the previous year – Kirill Kaprizov was cementing his status as a can't-miss prospect. He delivered, too, when he arrived to begin the next season, winning the Calder Trophy and earning Hart Trophy votes. But the panel was less enthusiastic about Matt Boldy, who ranked 47th. The error in judgment there is increasingly apparent as Boldy, with each passing season, has become more intrinsic to Minnesota's success. Further, when compared to the rest of the 2020 Top 50, Boldy ranks second in points per game – that's second-best, trailing only Kaprizov. Together, they're a 1-2 punch who have put the State of Hockey in excellent hands. **H**

WHO HIT, WHO MISSED

Here are our Future Watch top-50 lists from five and 10 years ago. Players are listed with their current NHL club and career games played as of Feb. 5

FUTURE WATCH 2020

RK. PLAYER, TEAM	NHL GP
1. Bowen Byram, BUF	217
2. Trevor Zegras, ANA	242
3. Igor Shesterkin, NYR	250
4. Kirill Kaprizov, MIN	315
5. Spencer Knight, FLA	78
6. Moritz Seider, DET	300
7. Dylan Cozens, BUF	333
8. Grigori Denisenko, Henderson (AHL)	33
9. Vasily Podkolzin, EDM	190
10. Alexander Romanov, NYI	329
11. Alex Turcotte, LA	77
12. Erik Brannstrom, Hartford (AHL)	294
13. Alex Newhook, MTL	267
14. Cole Caufield, MTL	258
15. Evan Bouchard, EDM	318
16. Victor Soderstrom, Brynas (Swe.)	53
17. Owen Tippett, PHI	322
18. Connor McMichael, WSH	208
19. Peyton Krebs, BUF	267
20. Ville Heinola, WPG	51
21. Morgan Frost, CGY	281
22. Ilya Sorokin, NYI	230
23. Vitali Kravtsov, Chelyabinsk (KHL)	64
24. Philip Broberg, STL	122
25. Juuso Valimaki, UTH	271
26. Liam Foudy, Bridgeport (AHL)	104
27. Nils Hoglander, VAN	270
28. Nolan Foote, Utica (AHL)	25
29. Oliver Wahlstrom, BOS	234
30. Thomas Harley, DAL	170
31. Philip Tomasino, PIT	185
32. Tobias Bjornfot, Charlotte (AHL)	128
33. Henrik Borgstrom, HV71 (Swe.)	111
34. Nick Robertson, TOR	132
35. Jake Bean, CGY	236
36. Jan Jenik, Belleville (AHL)	23
37. Alex Formenton, retired	109
38. Sam Poulin, Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL)	12
39. Josh Norris, OTT	233
40. Cayden Primeau, Laval (AHL)	55
41. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, BUF	138
42. Isac Lundestrom, ANA	308
43. Ty Dellandrea, SJ	192
44. Ryan Poehling, PHI	258
45. Ty Smith, Chicago (AHL)	131
46. Lassi Thomson, Malmo (Swe.)	18
47. Matt Boldy, MIN	257
48. Jack Studnicka, Ontario (AHL)	107
49. Cam York, PHI	210
50. Joe Veleno, DET	281

FUTURE WATCH 2015

RK. PLAYER, TEAM	NHL GP
1. Sam Reinhart, FLA	751
2. Sam Bennett, FLA	668
3. Leon Draisaitl, EDM	772
4. Nikolaj Ehlers, WPG	651
5. Max Domi, TOR	706
6. Anthony Mantha, CGY	507
7. Darnell Nurse, EDM	690
8. Andrei Vasilevskiy, TB	517
9. Teuvo Teravainen, CHI	722
10. Dylan Larkin, DET	706
11. William Nylander, TOR	656
12. Michael Dal Colle, Iserlohn (Ger.)	112
13. Griffin Reinhart, retired	37
14. Kevin Fiala, LA	619
15. Jake Virtanen, Iserlohn (Ger.)	317
16. Nick Ritchie, Bratislava (Svk.)	481
17. Anthony Duclair, NYI	587
18. Josh Morrissey, WPG	637
19. Robby Fabbri, ANA	438
20. Shea Theodore, VEG	550
21. Alex Tuch, BUF	507
22. Sonny Milano, WSH	313
23. Julius Honka, Davos (Sui.)	87
24. Derrick Pouliot, Syracuse (AHL)	226
25. Madison Bowey, Cleveland (AHL)	158
26. Mathew Dumba, DAL	708
27. Jacob de la Rose, Fribourg (Sui.)	242
28. Haydn Fleury, WPG	297
29. Nikita Scherbak, Villach (Aut.)	37
30. Ivan Barbashev, VEG	559
31. Samuel Morin, retired	29
32. Zach Fucale, Chelyabinsk (KHL)	4
33. Jakub Vrana, WSH	392
34. Brendan Perlini, Spartak Moscow (KHL)	262
35. Brett Ritchie, Schwenningen (Ger.)	391
36. Travis Sanheim, PHI	552
37. Kasperi Kapanen, EDM	500
38. Mikhail Grigorenko, St. Petersburg (KHL)	249
39. Steven Santini, Syracuse (AHL)	124
40. Ryan Pulock, NYI	534
41. Malcolm Subban, Belleville, (AHL)	87
42. Xavier Ouellet, Minsk (KHL)	178
43. Nick Paul, TB	456
44. Joel Armia, MTL	558
45. Adrian Kempe, LA	599
46. Thatcher Demko, VAN	234
47. Nic Petan, Kazan (KHL)	170
48. Christian Dvorak, MTL	505
49. Ryan Sproul, Selb (Ger.)	44
50. Teemu Pulkkinen, Poprad (Svk.)	83

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HOCKEY COMMISSIONERS ASSOCIATION

STEVE METCALF

THE CHANGE IN CHL ELIGIBILITY HAS ROCKED THE PROSPECT WORLD, AND NO ONE KNOWS THAT BETTER THAN THE MAN WHO SITS AT THE TOP OF THREE NCAA INSTITUTIONS

BY CAROL SCHRAM

AFTER GRADUATING from the University of New Hampshire, Steve Metcalf spent more than two decades in athletic administration at his alma mater. He became the commissioner of the Hockey East conference in 2020 and also currently serves as president of the NCAA's Hockey Commissioners Association and the board chair of College Hockey Inc.

THE HOCKEY NEWS: How involved were you in the path that led to last fall's NCAA Div. I council vote that will allow CHL players into NCAA hockey?

STEVE METCALF: It's hard to describe the process completely, even for me. Long story short, the NCAA thought they had some exposure or liability on some of their legislative pieces. And this was before they got a lawsuit filed against them. So, they were already looking at changing this legislation that would permit major juniors to be eligible for college hockey. That started about a year ago. Then, there was a lawsuit, I think it's a major-junior kid, certainly a Canadian kid, against 10 schools and the NCAA about being eligible.

Knowing that they'd already identified this item as something that was probably not sustainable, you could kind of see the writing on the wall.

The commissioners and the coaches' association, we're trying to educate the NCAA folks that didn't know as much about the ecosystem, if you will, of kids playing junior hockey, playing college hockey, playing in the NHL. Or, sometimes, you might skip a step if you're good enough.

THN: The new rules still don't throw the doors wide open for CHL players, though. Right?

SM: Players that have signed NHL contracts and gotten money wouldn't be eligible for college. But players that have played in the CHL, which is no longer called a professional league, as long as they haven't received any more than actual and necessary expenses outside of the education packages, then they would be eligible to play in college. And someone in Europe could be in the same situation. I think all the attention has been on the CHL because it's closer to home.

Some have said, "What happens if a CHL team tries to pay them more because they want to keep them? It would impact their eligibility?" I say, "Why would the kid or his family or his agent want to sacrifice his opportunities by doing something like that?" It just doesn't make sense.

THN: But there will still be CHL players who don't have the grades or aren't interested in going to a U.S. college for some other reason.

SM: Absolutely. I'm biased because I work in college hockey. I think it's great because you're going to play against 18-to-25-year-olds. You're going to play against good, strong players. Mature players.

THN: The CHL and its league commissioners seem to be emphasizing the idea that the

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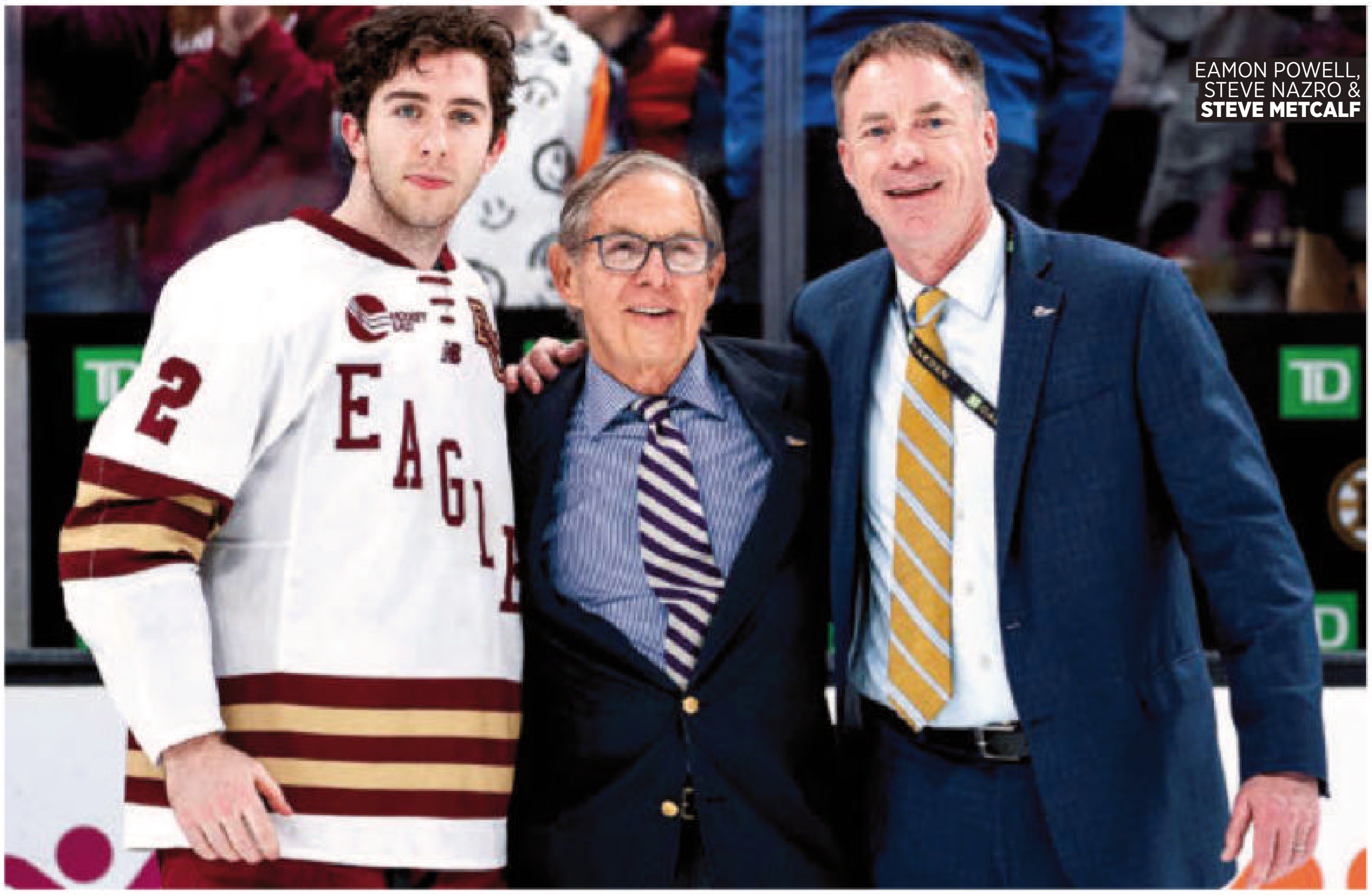

EAMON POWELL, STEVE NAZRO & **STEVE METCALF**

ALINA MULLER **& STEVE METCALF**

BEASTS OF THE EAST

Boston College took the Hockey East men's title in 2024, and Northeastern won the women's side in 2023.

players they foresee going to the NCAA will be graduating out of major junior. Is there some willful blindness there, as far as younger stars who might want to jump to the college ranks before they turn pro?

SM: If you think the college coaches are just going to wait patiently until they turn 20... wrong. They're not. And the kids aren't going to wait, either. What's been said, kind of privately, is that kids are committing to colleges but haven't told their CHL team yet because they're nervous about it. At some point, you have to rip the Band-Aid off and say the words.

> “I THINK THERE WILL BE ENOUGH PLAYERS THAT YOU COULD HAVE A COUPLE MORE TEAMS OF REALLY STRONG PLAYERS
>
> – STEVE METCALF

It wouldn't be fair for the CHL GM to be mad at the college coach. It's the player, the family, the agent that didn't tell him yet. But those younger players that are going to play in the CHL who wouldn't have previously, that hasn't happened yet. You've got to give it a minute as we go into the next couple of years.

THN: With the roster volatility that we've seen since NCAA athletes became free to transfer without punishment, is the addition of CHL players just another sort of shockwave in the recruiting process?

SM: If you have a really fantastic CHL player, and now you can get him but don't have any room or scholarship money left for him, then you've got a problem. It might be uncomfortable for someone on your team that might be out. But some of that will just naturally transpire.

I think the other thing is that the NCAA is now talking about caps on the roster. So, teams are going to have to manage the roster maybe a little bit differently because it might be a couple of players smaller. There's going to be some tough decisions to make to try and build out your roster. You've got more options.

THN: From what I understand, if a Canadian player goes to the NCAA, the student visa rules dictate that they can't receive any Name, Image, Likeness money, right?

SM: Under the current rules, any non-U.S. kid can't get NIL money. A lot of people think that's a silly rule that should be changed, but it hasn't changed yet.

THN: Is it too early to think about whether this might lead to more parity in NCAA hockey or possible expansion?

SM: I don't think there's any doubt that what has happened will make college hockey stronger and the rosters deeper. Right now, the NHL is comprised of about one-third college-hockey players. I do think that number will quickly rise, because that's how the ecosystem will settle in. I'm always optimistic that we can see growth. As the quality of teams and players increases in college, I think there will be enough players that you could have a couple more teams of really strong players.

THN: Looking beyond the CHL story, what else can you say about the current state of college hockey?

SM: Forget about the quality of play. Forget about the No. 1 draft picks. If you dove into college hockey attendance and viewership, you'd see the numbers are growing. I think college hockey is very, very healthy. H

FROM THE The Hockey News ARCHIVE
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ROCKET TO THE TOP

Before battling for the Hart, as he's doing again this season, Leon Draisaitl was sent back to the WHL for more seasoning

BY RYAN KENNEDY

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LEON DRAISAITL LETS OUT a cathartic sigh as he ponders a question he has clearly fielded before. It concerns a controversy he was involved in, regarding the 2015 world juniors and the fact the Edmonton Oilers didn't release him to play for Germany, the minnow hockey nation that would be relegated by Switzerland in the last days of the holiday classic in Toronto. "I didn't have anything to say, and I didn't want to say anything about it," Draisaitl said. "Either way it would have worked out."

Being a team with many passionate fans, Edmonton can't sneak anything under the radar, and many pundits and boosters wondered why the Oilers wouldn't let Draisaitl suit up for his country, when the Oilers ended up sending him back to the WHL days after the world juniors wrapped anyway.

But step back for a second and breathe in the following context: Draisaitl played for Germany at the previous WJC in Sweden and admitted afterwards that he put way too much pressure on himself. Sure, he was still Germany's best player, but he took too many penalties, and the squad had to scramble to avoid relegation to Norway. It wasn't a fun experience. This year, the Germans had a less capable team, even though Draisaitl is one of the best teens in the hockey world. It was surprising that Switzerland had to fight for relegation in the first place, and one player, even a great one, wouldn't have helped Germany escape its fate against their alpine cousins. The fact Edmonton sent Draisaitl back to junior shortly thereafter was, at worst, a miscalculation of optics but easily justified. "At the time he was playing well for us," said Oilers GM Craig MacTavish. "We felt there was a strong possibility he would be sent back to junior, but he was playing in the NHL and I thought that was valuable."

Draisaitl wasn't getting big

minutes in Edmonton and the Oilers did shelter him: he started nearly 80 percent of his shifts in the offensive zone and didn't face the best players on the other team often. The 37 games that Draisaitl played with the Oilers burned a year off his entry-level contract, but the timing of his return to junior meant he wouldn't be eligible for unrestricted free agency a year early.

Making Edmonton's decision easier was the fact Draisaitl was traded from the Prince Albert Raiders to the Kelowna Rockets, a squad that has consistently ranked as one of the best in the CHL all season. A big mover before the trade deadline, the Rockets had already acquired Draisaitl's former Prince Albert teammate Josh Morrissey, the Winnipeg first-rounder, and had one of the deadliest lines in junior with 2015 prospect Nick Merkley, Sharks pick Rourke Chartier and Flyers prospect Tyrell Goulbourne. MacTavish said the strength of the team Draisaitl was heading to factored into the decision to send him back to junior. Not that Draisaitl thinks he's hidden now. "I still think the spotlight is on me," he said. "It always is. But we have really good depth on the team and three lines that can score."

Since joining the Rockets, Draisaitl has put up way more than a point per game as Kelowna maintained a hammerlock on the WHL's Western Conference. But it hasn't been all smooth sailing. "It took a while to get going personally," Draisaitl said. "But that's normal, because we had so many new players."

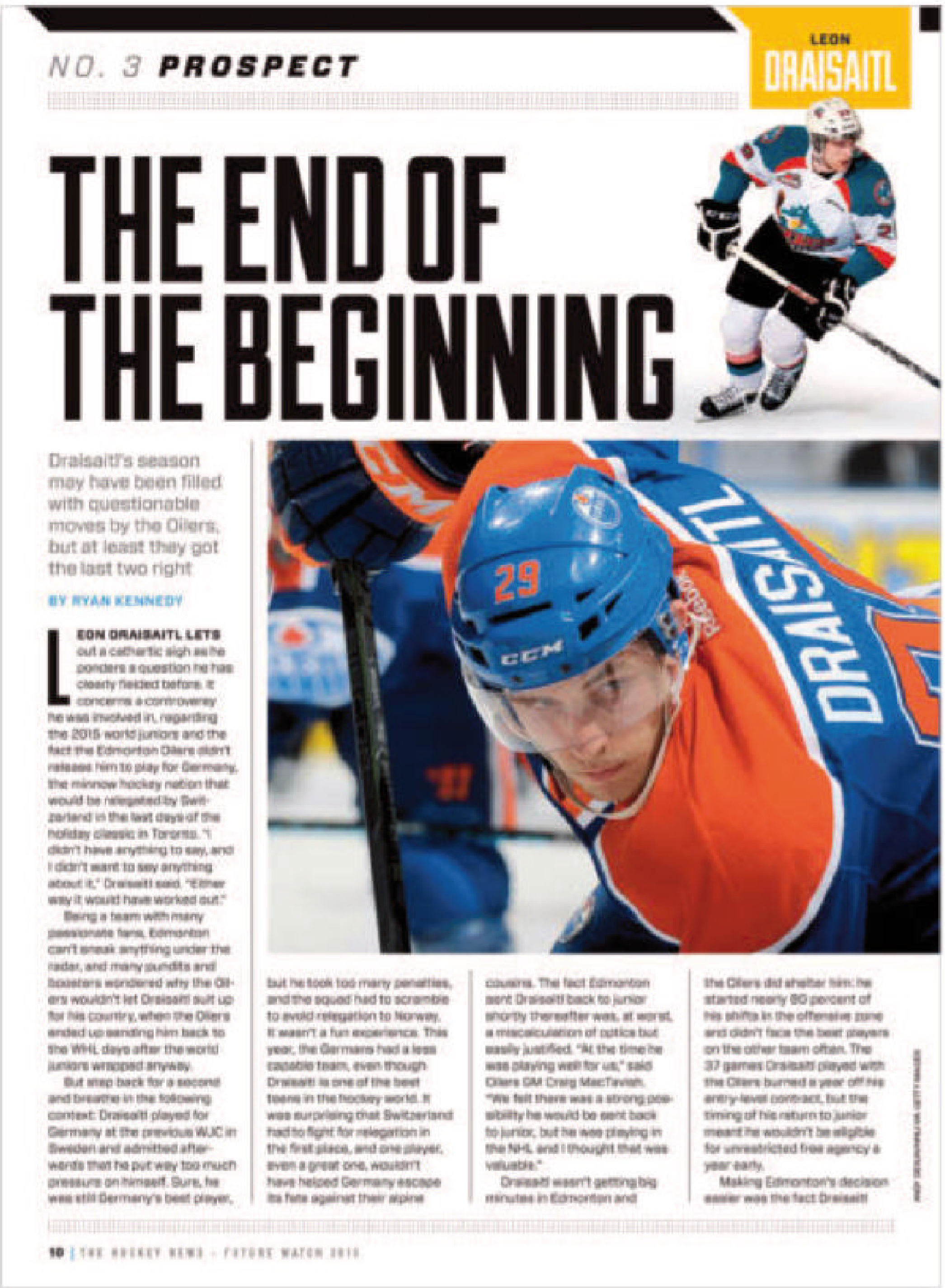
Kelowna coach Dan Lambert believes there were a couple other factors as well, which weren't distinctive to Draisaitl. First, there's the excitement of joining a new team, followed by the realization that you will no longer be in the NHL that season. Then there's the temptation that things will be easy because you're back in junior after squaring off against the near-telepathic and offensively gifted Sedin twins in Vancouver, or girding yourself for a battle in the corner with Nashville's nasty Shea Weber. Draisaitl is also staying with a billet family again, which probably means eating better than he did when he was living in Edmonton with Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Justin Schultz but may not hold the same "wow" factor for a hockey-loving teenager.

These can all be traps, exacerbated by the fact the gameplay itself is different among teens. "Junior is more scrambly," Lambert said. "Passes aren't always on the tape, guys aren't always where they are supposed to be. But he adjusted."

As did Draisaitl's teammates. Lambert believes some of them were in awe of Draisaitl at first, especially since he's more than just a big body. "He sees the game differently than a lot of players," Lambert said. "He slows the game down and likes to protect the puck. He's an intelligent guy."

Now that everybody is on the same page, the mission in Kelowna is clear: win the WHL title for the first time since 2008-09 and possibly the Memorial Cup for the first time since hosting in 2004. Draisaitl believes the Rockets have the team to do it. "All in all, I'm excited to be on a winning team," he said. "Which I think is important for a young player."

On the Rockets, he can work on faceoffs, kill penalties and play big minutes, something that just wasn't realistic this year with the Oilers. But Draisaitl has the real potential to do all of those things in the near future at the NHL level. While the timing may have been unorthodox, Edmonton made the right call in his development this season. "The time he spent in the NHL was valuable," MacTavish said. "And he got a good taste of what he will be in for next year." H



NO. 3 PROSPECT

LEON DRAISAITL

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Draisaitl's season may have been filled with questionable moves by the Oilers, but at least they got the last two right

BY RYAN KENNEDY

LEON DRAISAITL LETS out a cathartic sigh as he ponders a question he has clearly fielded before. It concerns a controversy he was involved in, regarding the 2015 world juniors and the fact the Edmonton Oilers didn't release him to play for Germany, the minnow hockey nation that would be relegated by Switzerland in the last days of the holiday classic in Toronto. "I didn't have anything to say, and I didn't want to say anything about it," Draisaitl said. "Either way it would have worked out."

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10 | THE HOCKEY NEWS – FUTURE WATCH 2015

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[THE LAST WORD]

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BORDER SECURITY
Matthew Tkachuk and Hagel kicked off the round-robin game with a literal bang, dropping the gloves at the opening faceoff.

ERIC BOLTE-IMAGN IMAGES

NINE SECONDS FOR ALL-TIME

Many figured the 4 Nations Face-Off would be a meaningless exhibition. Instead, we got a moment and a re-ignition of a rivalry that could alter the future of the game

TYPICALLY, THE BACK-PAGE COLUMN in Future Watch talks about prospects. After all, it's an issue dedicated to the world's best up-and-coming players. But when two teams made up of NHL stars may have altered the course of the sport with their performances in Team USA's round-robin win over Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off, it deserves prime coverage.

Yes, those two teams also played in the championship game, with Team Canada winning the trophy in a 3-2 OT triumph, but the table had been set in the previous clash, one which will likely have its own shorthand very soon. Back in 1980, the hockey world was blessed with the 'Miracle on Ice.' In 2025, we were gifted with 'Nine Seconds.' That was the amount of time it took for three fights to kick off a game that was drenched in meaning before the puck was even dropped. Canadians were livid with U.S. President Donald Trump's threats, with fans voicing their protest by booing the *Star-Spangled Banner* at the Bell Centre. The American players, with understandable patriotism toward their country and the anthem that represents it, were not happy with the jeers. Matthew Tkachuk fought Brandon Hagel off the opening faceoff. Immediately after, Brady Tkachuk challenged Sam Bennett on the next puck drop. Seconds later, the puck was actually moved… and then J.T. Miller (ill-advisedly) went after Colton Parayko. As someone who was covering the game live from the Montreal press box, I can say that the atmosphere during and after those nine seconds was unlike anything I have witnessed. The Stanley Cup final means a lot to two specific fan bases, but this was two entire *countries* watching their players stand up for each other and the logo on the front of their jerseys.

And then we had a classic hockey game. This is where things get interesting. Because the Nine Seconds made for a stunning opener, but it wouldn't have meant anything if the aftermath had been a sloppy 5-1 win for one of the teams. Instead, we got a fast, physical game that began with a highlight-reel goal from Connor McDavid and ended with a Jake Guentzel empty-netter to clinch the 3-1 win for Team USA. In the middle, Charlie McAvoy blew up McDavid twice with big hits while the Americans put on a defensive masterclass.

Were people watching? You bet they were. ESPN reported that an average of 4.4 million Americans watched on their channel, peaking at 5.2 million viewers. Ratings for the 4 Nations were about double what the NHL had initially hoped for – and that was before the numbers for Thursday's final were in.

While all this was happening in Montreal, the NBA was holding its annual all-star festivities in San Francisco. The NBA is more popular than the NHL, but you wouldn't have known it. The NBA is going through a bit of an identity crisis right now, with players such as Draymond Green lashing out at both the format of the All-Star Game and the state of play in general.

Now, the NHL won't usurp the NBA in popularity, and, frankly, I don't understand why you'd need to put one sport down in order to raise up another, but hockey clearly would like to see growth in America. The Nine Seconds fights instantly went viral on social media, and I don't think I'm making too much of an assumption that the start of the game was a big reason the ratings went through the roof. I covered the Stanley Cup final in Florida last season, and for those first five days in Fort Lauderdale, the only thing ESPN talked about was whether or not college basketball coach Dan Hurley would take a job with the Los Angeles Lakers.

But it feels like that is changing. "The game is in a better place because that game happened," said Canada coach Jon Cooper in the days before the final. And while the fights may have brought new fans in, the masterfully high play for the other 59:51 kept them there. "It was a great moment for USA Hockey," said U.S. center Dylan Larkin after the game. "I was thinking about kids watching the game and the message. The work ethic. The compete. Guys blocking shots. I hope kids watched it like I did as a kid, wanting so badly to put that jersey on as part of the next generation."

For a tournament that began with many skeptics, the 4 Nations may have just netted the sport a whole bunch of converts – and it only took nine seconds. H

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